# Little Ethiopia

David Miller

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# Chapter One → (March, 1996)

**T**hirty-eight dollars an hour was Jack Hameister's rate for services of and related to private investigation. Relatively new to the profession he felt the need to set a firm line on the rate. Didn't want to get low-balled by a comparison shopper. He had read a book on the business that told him this was the way to go. You quoted a rate and let them take it or leave it. As far as he was concerned the number was set in stone. *Thirty-eight*. It was non-negotiable. To such a degree that he had it printed on his business card just beneath the misspelling of his name.

*Jack Hamster*.

Well, Mr. Hamster, you get what you paid for in this life. And having ordered the card for two cents apiece via a printed catalog issued by a Tijuana-based firm, the result was hardly surprising. Nothing to be done about this error except to explain it away as a type of unctuous joke. *Jack Hamster, P.I.* Trying to make fun of himself as a means of customer relations, he would claim to those who asked. Sometimes he would just sit stone-faced and pretend not to know what they were talking about. He wasn't about to order a new batch of cards with five thousand of them still sitting under his desk in unopened boxes. He wasn't about to do a damn thing to rectify the situation even though it was a cause of constant embarrassment for him.

He didn't ever like to admit that he made a mistake. This was one reason why he found himself at the moment in such ramshackle circumstances. His office was replete with hot and cold running cockroaches. Its wood paneling was bowing from the walls in many places resultant from the mold that accrued underneath it eating away at the glue.

Probably the best strategy for Jack in front of a prospective client was simply to hide his business cards. He could speak his name and his non-negotiable rate. He didn't want to be taken advantage of. He thought this was what it meant to be a good businessman. To be unyielding in the face of objective reason. To not knuckle under to commonsense regardless of how superficially convincing it might be.

"Not including expenses," Hameister told this week's desperate soul, a Pakistani named Khan who had identified himself over the phone as a professor of philosophy at UCLA. They were speaking of such matters related to Jack's employment. Khan had come here unannounced after the phone call apparently to just check things out.

The flawed business card in Professor Khan's hand was shaking slightly as if the quoted rate had caused him some consternation.

"*Jack Hamster*," Professor Khan said to Jack then peered over his reading glasses. "Why not just get paid in sunflower seeds instead?"

According to Jack, and here was his stock line, the *Hamste*r was intended as an icebreaker, as a bit of self-effacement, in order to set sometimes distressed clients at ease.

"Sometimes folks come through here needing a laugh," Jack said to him. "A lot of cheating spouses and trusted employees that have misrepresented their criminal backgrounds," he said. "Not a lot of laughs on such occasions," he said. "So I'm trying to ease the tension with a joke. I'm trying to make fun of my

Germanic surname in hopes to make things easier for them when the truth comes."

Aloud, Professor Khan wondered if the cause of the client consternation Jack cited was from the case itself or his inattention to detail regarding his professional documents.

"The card's the card," Jack Hameister said to Professor Khan and thought for the first time that a corrective reprint might be in order. "Sometimes foreign people don't pick up on the humor right away."

According to Professor Khan, the common hamster (*mesocricetus auratus*) was nothing more than a domesticated mouse, verminous to the core and nothing that should be welcomed in an ably maintained home. A *hameister* on the other hand was a high level farmer manager or, to put it in medieval terms, a vassal.

"It's up to you which you'd rather be," Khan said to him. "But recall: a vassal is a slave merely removed of its chains," he said. "As vermin are vermin merely and should be pitied more than hated. You do not strike me as the verminous type, however. You're somebody with a tortured soul," he said. "You're somebody worthy of contempt, therefore, more than extinction."

Nice to know for their continued business relationship that Khan considered Jack more than a rat. But really (and Jack said to this in no uncertain terms a few seconds later) none of this had anything to do with the price of tea in China.

Well, of course, Khan had come here to inquire after Jack's services. But, pedantic to the core, he felt the need to launch into a disquisition. This thought led to that thought and so forth. The web of ideas whose successful traversing was coeval with creativity needed to negotiated fully. Too many people obviously had called Professor Khan a genius to his face during what looked to be a reasonably long life

for him to come to the point quickly. He was an expert at wasting other people's time. He was so good at it he wasn't even aware that it was being done.

His idea was that every sort of reality was subject to some manipulation of the mind. A vermin could be seen as a beloved pet just as a gelded slave could over the span of centuries conceptualize himself as a burgher with a keen (though attenuated) sense of liberty.

It's 1996, Khan said. And as we enter the new millennium such ideas as these should be foremost in our mind. Any injustice can be rationalized as some necessary step for survival. Just as every indignity could over time be accepted as part of a divine order by those men too un-reflective to know better.

"There's no reality without first *an interpretation of reality*," the Professor said to Jack, likely repeating one of his favorite lecture lines. "And, needless to say, no interpretation of reality is possible without the sustaining myths that underwrite the broader culture from which all individual perspective springs."

Religion was a great help to a prospective dictator, Khan said, because it made sheep of men even before the torture chamber was opened. The state torturer was in the business of turning rats into hamsters and vice-versa. Vassals become burghers when bathed in the light of heavenly promotion, just as burghers become kings.

"It's not your fault you're stupid," Khan said to Jack, summarizing the situation for him in as few words as possible. "God and culture made you this way. It's not your fault you haven't evolved beyond the phase of believing the reality that has been placed in front of you explicitly."

So many long-time academics like Khan had horded so many of these lines, well, like hamsters hording seeds in their cheeks. So much so that they could be recalled instantaneously and configured

slightly to fit the particular social situation. Despite appearances to the contrary the prof. wasn't being intellectually playful during the lines' recitation—thinking on his feet, that was to say, being really brilliant as opposed to merely insufferable—but merely expansive. In other words, there didn't seem to be a point to the performance other than to show off how smart he might in fact, at some point his life, have been. He was merely cashing in his chips, so to speak, for a life of what he had fallaciously assumed was hard work, but another, more objective observer, would assume as days full of backstabbing, sloth, and the dubious triumphs gained within a liberal arts hothouse too hermetic to even be counted as part of the general economy let alone the center of American intellectual life.

It was obvious enough and it was something even Jack Hameister, cursed with cloudy perception by over-indulgence, should have been able to pick up on over time. But because of the admittedly shabby surroundings, Jack doubted somehow that Khan was merely trying to show off.

Well, not *merely*. There was some subcutaneous point to the blather in other words, a motive underwriting all this social-construction-of-reality talk. Professor Khan didn't seem like a shy man especially, somebody from whom the truth would have to be pulled in agonizing stages like a rotten tooth from a pyorrhea-riddled gum line. What he was saying was more or less self-evident. On the other hand nobody in their right mind would ever confuse a golden hamster from a common red-eyed rat.

And if you were to expand on this notion, Professor Khan was saying (but, Jack thought. who would do that in this day and age? Expand on *any* notion), you would see that all strictures on our personal conduct must come from *within* rather than *without*. The phrase Natural Law, whose modern contractual sense was

established by Hobbes, assumed a type of regulating mechanism inherent in men's behavior. This was simply because they were alive. But if this was the case how did one account for the presence of so many martyrs in this world? Religious martyrs, irreligious martyrs, martyrs to the unarticulated cause of release from physical suffering that drove so much of the world economy. The junky, the boozehound, the pussy bandit. All these men, Khan said, were strident violators of nature's so-called "law." But they were very much, well at least in a certain cultural context, to be admired.

"You would see a martyr with a bomb strapped onto his chest enter a nursery school," Khan said to Jack Hameister, briefly checking the underneaths of his fingernails for schmutz, "and declare the action evil."

As if revivifying a particular lecture, the doctor looked around for handwritten notes that he seemed to believe resided right in front of him.

"But for some," he said, "heroism and villainy are exactly the opposite of those terms' meanings it is logical to assume the majority of men conceptualize them as being. So now you see how a hamster could morph into a mouse or even a rat at an instant. Mr. Hamster," said professor Khan. "There's really nothing to it save being in possession of a mind soft enough to be shaped. And there's little shame to it I have to believe. If only because it happens so frequently with men and women both almost without social comment."

The real reason he had come to see Jack, Professor Khan said, was that he had a disobedient daughter whose face was in dire need of disfigurement in the traditional Islamic manner of being doused with sulfuric acid.

Using the Holy Quran as an unimpeachable source, the throwing of acid wasn't a requirement so much as

a convenient means to an end. It could have happened in a variety of ways in fact, none of which had anything to do with modern chemistry. Take a serrated knife, for example, and start to saw off pieces of her like a particularly gristly bit of ham at a Christian celebration. The incising of teeth worked just as well (though not for an adherent of the Prophet's directives, cannibalism being strictly verboten along with making direct eye contact with any woman not your wife or mother). And then there was the time honored act and art of beheading. In the West the practice was all but taboo. Khan therefore declined to even ask.

"I'm not the low savage you take me for," Khan said to him but in a cursory manner suggesting of course the case for this assertion could never be made completely. In many ways he was *exactly* the low savage Jack took him for, unrestrained by moral stricture. He wanted to put a troublesome woman in her place, to "right a wrong" as he would describe with the heavy irony of a man who denied the existence of both right and wrong in more or less equal measures.

He was not a religious fanatic, not a devotee of sharia-style jurisprudence, but simply a man with certain sociopathic tendencies that had found a trendy cultural outlet for the feelings that arose from those tendencies. Despite his evident sophistication he had a notion of himself as somebody loyal to the old ways. He admired Islam deeply because he felt it was the curse so many of his fellow men, his Pakistani countrymen most prominent amongst them, deserved. But he was jaded and westernized and too well-heeled to take the risk himself. He had no intention of spending his final days in jail over an attack whose justification was as fuzzy to him as it was for some slack-jawed public explainer who would appear on TV in its aftermath, full of excuses for the inexcusable. He needed a proxy, therefore, to perform what in his

otherwise rationalization-free intellect was rationalized as a purification ritual. In greater Los Angles there dwelt a whore that had brought shame upon him. His fellow Paki's had scarred certain women for life for less. And he was nothing if not sympathetic to his former culture. He loved the violence of Pashtun tribal culture, its contempt for all standards of modern decency and the rejection of the notion that reasoned deliberation should rest at the heart of any system of punishment. In that culture everything was spontaneous especially violence against women. In it strength was gained absent of any civilized behavior but rather through a blind adoption of tradition. It made one seem strong to behave like an animal, like a pink-faced fascist. To Khan, faithless in the explanatory power of both reason and God, and physically weakening due to a bud of cancer recently discovered on his liver's anterior lobe, fascism was the only (admittedly appalling) way forward. He felt he needed to be resolute in his moral outlook before the end came. He needed to reclaim a sense of belief in something apart from his own eternally deconstructing mind even if that was only his personal capacity for savagery, here defined as a release from reason, which was a poor substitute for spiritual ecstasy, but any port in a storm. Khan believed the concept of God was as dead as modernist critique. And that no new movement would revive it, at least in the short scope that he had to live.

No need to feel sorry for Maidul Khan hardly despite such dour thoughts. As at the core of his despondency sat a type of un-distilled mendacity that one glimpsed nowadays only in maximum security prisons or in the thin psychology of comic book villains (Batman's nemesis the Joker, for example, who wished perennially to destroy Gotham City even though he was very much a citizen of it).

“I’m sure you’ll think it over,” he said to Jack in a sniggling sort of way that suggested he didn’t believe Hameister was even capable of the act. Despite the superficially vile nature of Professor Khan’s request—at least to Western ears—the reason he thought Jack might accept was that he was offering, at least on a prorated basis, far more for the job than thirty-eight dollars an hour.

The cashier’s check he brought with him to prove his *bona fides* was a forgery purchased as with so many other forgeries in a Tijuana bazaar. But he assumed it would gain Jack’s compliance simply because it was a clever forgery and in pecuniary matters Jack was no expert.

“You can hold it under your nose and sniff it like it was a Cuban cigar if it is your desire,” Maidul Khan said once having produced the document worth twelve thousand dollars from the lapel pocket of his bespoke suit. Khan would put it in a safe deposit box and let Jack come look at it anytime he wanted up until that point that the service was performed. He would let him subject the check to all matter of scrutiny if he wanted to let him be satisfied that it was real.

Look, how stupid would that be, Khan said to him, if at the last minute, a man who had contracted for an illegal act and provided proof that he had contracted for it, would refuse payment to the one person who would be able to throw him in jail for life? With that amount of money, furthermore, either being withdrawn or received the banks would be obliged to notify the IRS and excuses on both sides would need to be readied. They would not need to maintain a relationship for the next year to sync their stories. Of course, Professor Khan would be the prime suspect in the attack regardless. So here too was another reason that he could be trusted. It would be him, not Jack, to bear the weight of suspicion for the attack. In

alienating Jack he would more or less be condemning himself utterly.

The attack, the vitriolage so called, the *qisas*, would have certain criteria attached to it for it to qualify as a success. Khan was insistent on a good job in this instance. He wasn't an American extrovert after all looking to "send a message." He was deeply serious about this matter as only the most truly maniacal of men were. A typical American extrovert was like the froth on the top of the cappuccino: insubstantial as a ghost and more or less free to be completely ignored. For himself in this instance, Khan was not looking to lay down the law. Rather he was looking to promulgate an effect. He was looking to become an instrument of his own will just as the Quran councils that one should become an instrument of God's will at such occasions when the community is under siege. To a Pashtun male whose westernization has been cracking at the edges for decades, there was also felt a tribal requirement to issue correction where needed. Maidul's daughter Menen was indeed a whore whose punishment would be apt, if insincerely rendered. He didn't feel any imam would give him a hard time about it if he was ever held to judgment in Islamabad. From a Pashtun perspective, he didn't think really he would be doing anything wrong.

He was, however, increasingly worried about the competence of his chosen proxy. As opposed to the moral rubric (if there was any) that his deeds would occur in despite the fact that he had promised to pay handsomely.

"The substance must penetrate," he said to Jack. And by this he meant that the damage rendered by the sulfuric acid must go beyond mere cutaneous disfigurement. A simple chemical burn of the sort one might see at a processing facility routinely wouldn't be as much as a down payment in regards to satisfying his soul's hunger. Within the space of a month his

daughter's wounds likely would be completely forgotten by her. And there would be no net gain to speak of.

He believed that the soul of retribution involved a continuous ushering up to and through the gates of hell. There was no middle ground or even an "eye for an eye" valuation in this instance. The "substance" must penetrate in other words beyond artifice or the ability to heal. The cartilage of his daughter's nose should be entirely eaten away to the point that no degree of restorative plastic surgery would be possible, let alone desirable.

Total blindness and a slight bit of decay in the jaw bone too so that pain came with every swallow. This would be a delightful outcome for Professor Khan, even though in whatever agreement he and Jack set forward he wouldn't insist upon it. Too much to ask for as his confidence in Hameister was waning by the second. Maybe he could put it in as a type of incentive for him. He could give him five hundred dollars per eye.

"There will be pictures of course in the aftermath," Khan told Jack matter-of-factly as if he was the one that had made arrangements for them to be taken. "The media as regarded episodes like this are notoriously inquisitive. They will feel bad about being inquisitive but they won't be able to help themselves. And so they will also provide me with confirmation about how much damage was done."

The jaw, Khan pointed out, was the gate through which all manner of pleasure, food and drink and song and idyll chat, traveled.

"You make her a monster, one which would never be forgotten about ever if a child should look beyond whatever veil she is wearing at the time," Khan said to Jack and rose out of the flimsy fold-up chair that the office afforded to clients. "To do this I think you should research your method carefully," he said. "I

don’t think a three ounce heave and run would prove effective in this regard. Too scattershot an approach. I don’t think a simple immediate dash out of the premises would suffice at all,” he said and looked out the window to witness the sight of an Eritrean woman dressed entirely in silk balancing a load of wash on her head.

Khan told Jack that he could be wrong about all of these matters but this was what his imagination told him regardless. There was a difference not only in the Pashtun world but in the world of common sense between scarring and disfigurement and Khan sought the latter. He was looking to unmake God’s majestic creation into a vulgar sculpture. He was looking to bring a plague upon the earth to one individual in particular and have her remain in that state for all time.

His daughter wasn’t such a bad person at least in objective terms. But realize the indignities to be gladly borne by a member of what was essentially a warrior culture are entirely slight in comparison to those of the West.

“She praised a rival of mine at a public event,” he said to Jack by way of an explanation for his actions and left it at that. He made no real attempt to translate into reasonable terms his motivation. He assumed all attempts at that would fall short. So he simply abandoned the attempt before it was under way. He thought a robust description of his inner life would be difficult if not impossible to render. He thought nobody, least of all Jack, would be satisfied hearing it regardless.

Now the way he wanted this transaction to work would be for them to meet again in a pre-disclosed place thirty-eight hours after the sentence (if that’s what you wanted to call it) was carried out. Khan would bring the check with him and they could review the evidence of completion as it stood together. He

wanted to be fair with Jack, he said. But there was no reason to trust him based on his word only.

"The reason I chose you in the first place, Mr. Hamster," he said, "the reason that I'm here at all, is that you seem almost alone amongst your profession, as the type who would accept such an assignment to begin with."

Maybe this was not such a slight against Jack as a massive overestimation of the private detective business as presently configured in Los Angles. Jack Hameister said as much to Khan in no uncertain terms. Why, there had to be twenty, thirty lowlifes sporting PI licenses if only in the downtown area who would take Khan's money and maybe even less than was being offered to do his bidding. The gumshoe business of late had fallen into disrepair (if it ever was in repair in the first place). A lot of otherwise unemployables, a lot of ex-this and ex-that--would be cops with social or intellectual challenges, and the odd druggie (like Jack) who found the ability to set one's own hours appealing and amenable to their all-consuming avocation.

Don't ask him for names and references, Jack always said to a prospective client. Soon it dawned on him that he was negotiating against himself. So maybe in this instance he should shut the fuck up and let Khan's insult roll off him like water off a duck's back. He was desperately in need of cash. They had not yet settled on a final amount also. If the amount of Khan's check was a take it or leave it offer Jack supposed he would leave it. If only because it was always his experience that such ultimatums were one-sided invocations aimed at suckers. He never saw a take it or leave it offer that was a win for the party being propositioned. He hadn't been pushed to the wall far enough to simply knuckle under and accept.

He realized that the motive behind Khan's insults against him were to provide the impression that he held all the cards in the negotiation. Jack didn't

understand this fully as up until this moment Khan was the only one implicated in any sort of wrongdoing. But this was the impression that was trying to be left apparently. He didn't see where Khan's leverage was in all this. He didn't see how he could be so placid just having committed (in the eyes of an overzealous constabulary), a felony in front of a rank stranger.

"If you feel so confident in what you're describing to me," he said to Khan. "Maybe I call the cops right now and let them try and find your pain point."

He waited for a reaction from him. Five, ten seconds passed and they were back to the original subject. Khan hadn't so much as blinked when that threat was issued. Somehow he was serene in his confidence. He couldn't be intimidated, at least not in that straightforward way.

The truth was Jack Hameister needed the money horribly and presently Professor Khan was the only one willing to do business with him. He didn't understand how a stranger like Maidul Khan could be so attuned to his needs. He always had thought of himself as a discreet individual. But maybe all the cocaine he had ingested over the past year had told him this lie convincingly enough so that he had believed it. He might well have had a neon sign above his head that flashed *loser* constantly following him everywhere. He didn't know really what sort of aura he emitted. The hard drugs over the course of years had inhibited his ability to self-detect. He didn't know what sort of vibe he broadcasted to people any longer and whether or not they were picking up on something that was objectively there or something that was created from their own neuroses wholesale.

The real reason for Khan's visit apart from the superficial act of delivering his proposal in person was to recruit Jack for further endeavors along the same lines as throwing acid in his daughter's face.

“I have great esteem for the strictures that faith places on the faithful,” Khan said to him once he was certain that Jack’s attention had wandered back to the matter at hand. “But I am not in any way what you might call a religious extremist.”

Rather, he said, he was merely somebody who had the bigger picture in mind at all times.

“I’m seeking out moral certainty, sir,” he said to Hameister as if Jack was about to dig further into the question of what words the victim had used precisely to earn her father’s wrath. But this too was boilerplate in a way. In reality Jack hadn’t found this request so very strange at all. He had been too long in LA’s suppurating shadows, broken and therefore morally comprised, to take exception when a particular vicious act of retribution was suggested. Happened semi-frequently actually but it usually involved acts of blackmail or beating somebody up. Here was a new angle certainly, the sulfuric acid, and one which intrigued Jack with its byzantine and strangely off-putting nature. But the spirit of the activity was deeply familiar to him. Look: certain people in this life wanted to force their will upon others and discovered through trial and error that violence was the most efficient way to carry this wish forward. The “I’m not a nut but I admire them” speech that Khan just gave also had been spoken to him on a variety of occasions. Thugs with PhDs (and there were many of these roaming around) needed to be assured that their thuggishness was somehow elevated. So it was that the defense of throwing one’s wife off a tenth floor balcony say was always prefaced by a quote from Immanuel Kant. They were special cases always, not criminals in anything but the most technical sense. They were simply righting a wrong, performing a dark civic duty that few would have the courage to perform otherwise.

They were slumming angels desirous to be cleansed of the filth they brought into the world. They sought to distance themselves from personal evil as soon as it was spewed forth by them.

The problem with Professor Khan, in Hameister's somewhat knowledgeable opinion on the subject, was that he laid it on far too thick to keep a straight face in the wake of a choice utterance.

"I don't think you know yourself all that well," Jack said to him and again waited for some sort of reaction. "Because hiring somebody to do the dirty work for you means you're a coward. You can look at it any way you want but this is what it means. You've punted. You lack the strength to follow through. You lack the courage of your convictions."

It seemed that Jack Hameister, just like Maidul Khan, was somewhat enamored of authority and the authority figure Jack fetishized most was himself. He had no sense of honor in matters not involved in the promotion of his own well-being and this notion of certain criteria needing to be met before payment was received struck Jack as counterproductive to his own long term wellbeing. Which was merely to say that he wouldn't agree to such terms ever.

Khan didn't see Jack as any sort of physical threat to him personally. Jack just then was wondering how this might be.

It was a very odd conclusion to draw given that the professor assumed Jack as a person capable of real violence. Furthermore, he knew damn well Jack would attach no sense of honor to the act of acid throwing as one of Khan's fellow Pashtuns might. He didn't understand therefore why Khan was so much at ease in this situation. He was not amongst friends here certainly. He was not somebody that by rights should have seemed as in control if the situation as he was.

This all led Jack to the conclusion that Khan's visit was the bleeding edge of a setup. Maybe Khan was a

narc sent by the State of California on the strength of a series of anonymous tips. It wasn't that he did this sort of thing every day, so money in advance would be required for Jack to accomplish even the first thing for Maidul Khan. And even then he reserved the right to go to the cops and narc on the freak. The criteria for what counted as real damage therefore would be entirely left up in the air. He didn't have a whole lot invested in being known as LA's premier secular defacer of innocent women. Except for the money, he had no motivation to be associated with somebody who was providing him the opportunity to do so.

The picture Khan produced eventually from his lapel pocket of the intended victim was of a stocky browned skin girl with short hair, a nose ring, and a contemptuous sort of stare as if she could intuit what they were talking about doing to her at that moment.

"You take your time," Khan said to him slowly enough that indicated he must have been kidding. That something that he had on Jack but was not revealing at the moment was self-evident in the manner that he was speaking. Of course Jack had done bad things since his drug use had gotten serious. But this sort of blackmail only worked if the blackmailer revealed the proof he had assembled beforehand. More so, blackmailing didn't seem an elevated enough form of larceny for Maidul Khan to engage in at least so directly. Maybe he was just blessed with the capability of looking into men's hearts and knowing how they would behave in any particular situation. Maybe this was all a kind of game for him and no sort of money would change hands regardless of how compliant he was to Khan's wishes.

If you wanted to scar somebody badly with sulfuric acid, the logical way to go about this, Jack thought, was to devise a delivery system that allowed for maximum exposure from a distance.

“Maybe just a plastic cup will not do the trick,” Jack said to Chesley “Lucky” Murchison minutes after Khan had exited his office. Before leaving Khan had left his phone number and the two had reached a vague accord to meet again on this matter in due course. Nothing had been agreed upon as of yet and because of this Jack thought he had the upper hand in the negotiation. The next time they met Khan likely would be more pliable with his budget and less insistent on his criteria for success. It was always this way in matters turning to contract hits or blackmail. The customers were at a severe disadvantage relative to the suppliers. They were desperate at some essential level or else they wouldn’t have come around asking for help in this matter in the first place. They had a severe problem and initially they were trying to disguise the fact that this was so. But eventually the reality of the situation would boomerang on them. And then they would agree to whatever terms the hit man had laid out.

Never having engaged in this sort of thing before, Jack nevertheless had during the course of his former career as an investigative reporter for the *Los Angeles Times* interviewed enough killers-for-hire or would-be killers-for-hire to know the dynamics of negotiation. He assumed that anybody weak enough to have to contract out their own murders was more or less admitting their own ineffectual nature in regards to deeply serious matters. What he didn’t assume on the contrary was whether he was strong enough, or maybe desperate enough, to go through with it once the price was fixed. His drug use over the past few years had inured him to his own at root craven nature. He was not at heart a killer-for-hire or even a defacer of women. Like Khan himself rather he considered himself to be above the fray in regards to this dark transaction. He had a college degree and a semi-respectable work history. And so even as he talked

about the need for further leverage in negotiations he was in fact thinking of ways he could Welsh on the deal once it was made. He would ask for a down payment for example then go right to the cops and rat Khan out. Or maybe he could only throw a little bleach at his daughter from a distance to render a bit of burning on her face and strong arm Khan for some further payment while avoiding responsibility for a crime that, once the media outlets got wind of it, must surely carry a life sentence if he was convicted.

So the thought of a mere plastic cup filled with an astringent agent altogether less corrosive than sulfuric acid kept recurring to Jack even as the thoughts mounted about how to avoid the action altogether. Maybe a cup of bleach which would certainly burn the skin and nose and eyes but might be seen as something less than a heinous attack if he were apprehended, a type of gross prank that nowadays could actually be seen on a continuum of more or less normalized violent behavior such as the Knockout Game as played by black youths in many cities in increasing numbers. An eighteen month sentence plus probation say versus a life sentence if, as Khan demanded, the substance “penetrated.” He realized deep down this half-assed approach never worked in real life but his mind was configured to favor such compromise solutions, some third way between righteous existence and outright criminal conduct. It wasn’t too great of an exaggeration to claim all of his recent troubles stemmed from this tendency to avoid committing to a definite course of action, but he couldn’t help thinking about things in this manner. To him, there always had to be an easier way. It was an instinctive belief like a salmon’s mania for its spawning grounds. And encounters like he had just had with Maidul Khan had only placed this tendency into overdrive. Bleach, yes, or maybe something slightly stronger altogether. In all candor he had no

real exposure to handling sulfuric acid at all. He had no idea where it could be purchased in the Los Angeles area. He had no idea whether you even needed a license to do so.

The noisy pachinko parlor in this tiny section of Little Ethiopia with all its dissipations and exclamations in so many Asiatic tongues and occasional outbursts in gibberish was not the best area of course to speak of such matters. But this was where Lucky Murchison, Jack's only real criminal acquaintance, held court, him being what amounted to the boss of the place and more or less all the security that the mostly illegal establishment had, if you discounted a sleepy pit bull in the corner who was more in need of protection than some of the clientele.

"I'm thinking about rubber gloves," Jack said to Lucky after the noise of a grand jackpot winner occurring in the corner had subsided. A grand total of eighty dollars had been won by this high roller. But constantly there were rumors of a bigger game going on in the parlor's anterior. More to the point, Jack didn't understand the desire that any of them had to empty their hard earned wages into a machine that was utterly naked about its random nature. No beer was served at this establishment thanks to the Los Angeles' hyper-vigilant alcohol authorities but regardless the joint was crowded at all hours of the day. Different machines were replete with different configurations but it all wound up usually with a buck fifty surfeit for the house. They couldn't believe somehow the game was as random as it appeared. They were always looking to analyze the ball's action, find telling patterns where none existed, crack the code as it were and thus win a fortune before the gaming commission finally shut places like these down.

The rubber gloves that Jack would be forced to use would need to be of the half-inch thick industrial grade

variety if they were to be worth a goddamn, Lucky Murchison pointed out. Sulfuric acid was as powerful a corrosive as existed in nature. It ate through ordinary protection too quickly for such prophylactics to be of any use to its wearer. These industrial gloves went up to the elbow moreover and weighed two pounds each. In other words they were counterproductive to someone bent on sneaking around and using the element of surprise to get what he wanted. Also using them made it hard to grip curved objects and likely very hard to throw things with any sort of velocity at all. This latter activity was something Lucky had yet to try. He had worn the gloves more or less everyday while working in an oil refinery on the wrong side of Bakersfield. The slightly putrescent smell of them always returned to him whenever the thought of that place was conjured. There was no ventilation in them, at least those old ones that they had given Lucky and every hour they were forced to change into a new pair to let their hands breathe. So it wasn't so advisable to use these, therefore. Better to think of a new strategy altogether.

Lucky who had a certain background in chemistry —he had his own meth lab in Portland before being busted in the 1960s—was somebody Jack looked to as an expert on these matters even though he was likely as full of shit as the next motherfucker.

"Don't do it," was his unsolicited advice to Jack once the meeting with Khan was explained to him in enough detail for him to form an opinion at all. "First off," he told Jack, "you don't know the reason behind this motherfucker's request. Everything he likely told you is a lie. Second, there's no way you get paid if he's even slightly crooked. Or just somebody who don't know what he wants from the arrangement from the start. He's a complete cunt of a human being and that's if he's being honest with you," he told Jack. "You look into his eyes," he said, "the next time you

see him and ask yourself if you can trust him. But you can't trust him, that's the nature of the arrangement you have with him to begin with. So you're fucked either way. In Pakistan they call it an honor killing, I think. But where's the honor of getting an outsider to come and do the dirty work for you? My opinion he's a narc," Lucky said echoing something Jack had thought originally. Lucky scratched at his protruding belly exposed through a Hawaiian shirt that he kept mostly unbuttoned mysteriously from the sternum below. "Maybe he's not an official narc but somebody conducting an experiment. He doesn't give a damn I'm guessing whether you accept the assignment or not. Aren't there Muslims who help other Muslims out for shit like this?" Lucky asked him. "He can go on the Muslim version of the classified ads and troll for users that way. And think about it. How are you guessing he tracked you down anyway?"

Jack Hameister told Lucky that Khan had claimed to be a devotee of his journalistic endeavors.

"He said I had flare for cutting to the chase," he told Lucky. "That I knew about the soul of crime. He said I never sentimentalized what I wrote about and this made me somebody in the know about such matters."

Also he assumed somebody with such a shabby address in this part of LA would be suitably desperate enough to at least hear him out. According to Khan, his daughter Menen was some sort of bad person. She was a heretic of some stripe and eminently worthy of the fate that awaited her.

Well of course it was something he needed to say if only as a disclaimer for the psychotic nature of his request. He hadn't really elaborated on this notion as he likely realized that Jack, as with all Westerners would have a hard time accepting the notion anyway. Or the concept of heresy in general. To judge by his behavior Khan seemed to feel that he had Jack hooked

already. No need to waste his time on a back story that wouldn't be believed anyway, therefore. Above it all there was this weird vibe that he gave off of just going through the motions. Because maybe as Lucky pointed out he didn't care if Jack accepted or not.

In pachinko (or at least this occidental version of it) a plastic ball was set in motion at the top of a series of obstacles. The player sat in a straight back chair waiting to see where it would finally come to rest at the game's bottom. There was no manipulation of the ball allowed once it was set in motion. All the input one could have with such a system was completed after the first tenth of a second. Merely the player sat there in front of the glass enclosure and stared. The bets that were paced concerned in which the trough the ball would finally come to rest. And there was a feeling likely at being at the mercy of mysterious forces all throughout the ball's descent by the game's players.

Only the truly superstitious or stupid would have likely played at all. There was no skill involved in it whatsoever. It was a game for saps. Or rather for dreamers who felt they were made of finer stuff altogether and were simply waiting to ascend unto a more elevated plane of being (i.e., strike it rich).

So it was Lucky Murchison's observation that Jack was no better and no worse than any number of these pachinko jockeys one might behold in front of them at the moment. The fact that Jack was talking about it at all with such intensity, likely meant that he had already committed to it. In other words his ball was set in motion already. He had no control whatsoever on where it would fall despite all his protestations to the contrary.

"You do it or don't do it, be evil or good, be a loser all your life or somebody with the balls to take what he wants and in any way that he wants," Lucky said, stating his own credo more or less and pointing out

how distant Jack's present behavior was from it. In doing so he was noting Jack's history of rationalizations. He stared balefully through his one functioning eye at two skeletal Somalis in t-shirts attempting to upend one of the games slightly by pressing their crotches against the Plexiglas exterior. Wouldn't work because just like a pinball machine there was an accelerometer built into the base of such devices that shut the game off at the instant of its activation. Such stick men were always trying that shit only to demand their money back at the point at which the machine deactivated due of their illicit efforts. Balls of brass or shit for brains, Lucky thought depending on what your tolerance for such shenanigans was. For himself, when he was on duty he usually removed the cattle prod he kept underneath the counter for such occasions and set to work to right a wrong. He didn't feel sorry for any of these scamming hollow-cheeked motherfuckers no matter how much they sobbed when the moment of truth came for them. He didn't care if they were minors or not.

He didn't give a damn what type of cancer their mamas might have or whatever treatment they were being denied at the moment because of a Medicaid snafu. He wasn't a social worker in a fake Hawaiian shirt. Of criminal stock himself, he was merciless to all criminals he happened to encounter in life, reasoning that they saw the world as he saw the world, which was to say as a wolf peering inside a chicken coop, relentlessly calculating what could be stolen and what could be devoured whole on the spot.

He respected criminals only because it took guts to do what some of them did even as their brains were left behind to wither and die on the vine.

"There has to be an easier way," he said to Jack concerning a practical method that would allow one to launch acid into a woman's face and not get burned by

it. If Jack wanted, Lucky could research the situation at the local public library for him during his off hours. He couldn't believe your average skirt-wearing Pakistani zealot had any sort of technology that was not available or at least re-producible in the greater Los Angeles area. Maybe there was some sort of heavy plastic gun that could be purchased wholesale from an industrial supplier and used for this very purpose. The acid itself, Lucky knew, could be bought over the phone without so much as an ID.

There were more uses for sulfuric acid than any California law accounted for, let alone restricted. It's one of the most popular solvents manufactured. It's an item that would raise no eyebrow whatsoever if it were to arrive on a man's doorstep one evening in the five gallon fiberglass tank required for the shipping of the material in certain concentrations.

Nothing to get riled up over yet, Lucky told Jack, but if you needed the money, you needed the money. That situation was never going to change on its own, regardless of how many good thoughts about humanity you managed to create in between the dark criminal ruminations you've already been considering.

"In my day," he said to Jack once it seemed a bit of straight up advice was sought, "I wasn't any sort of thinker or somebody who considered other options. Thinking for me proved a cure for crime not a pathway to it. For you I see it's different. You're in a bind and can't get out of it. And you're gonna be fucking miserable until you can decide for yourself one way or the other which way you have to go."

He did advise Jack to research his intended victim slightly if only to ascertain her comings and goings. Or if she owned a gun.

"Don't underestimate what people are capable of in that situation," Lucky said to Jack. "I'd throw and run, throw and run. Or maybe even don't go forward with it at all. Even people with their eyes gouged out

will come for you, remember. So if she has a gun, she'll probably use it on you. And there's nothing you can do about it."

Jack Hameister knew enough to know that the tradition (if that's what you wanted to call it) of the acid attack was entirely foreign to westerners and entirely out of scope regarding its entrenched notions of justice and retribution. Its cruelty was inherent and intentional, that was to say, not accidental or even non-existent. Those who used it used it as a weapon of terror, not an instrument of justice, to deter other perceived transgressions against the status quo. All the blustering about revenge or hurt family pride was utter boilerplate, spoken more as a convention to invoke a long since vanished tribalism than any sort of legitimate grievance felt deeply. They were in this sense no different from American gangsters who did much the same to their victims only with entirely different instruments. Kneecapping and facial disfigurement were entirely similar terroristic outcomes, Jack Hameister realized. The perpetrators were always intent on sending messages to others. Even an eye for an eye would have been considered a moral improvement unto this code of justice.

From his time spent in prison up in Chino, Lucky Murchison understood what this was the case in this instance. Thus he was taking pains to be as clinical as possible in his analysis of the situation. To declare the entire affair "monstrous" and leave it at that.

"It's the way they want it to end for everybody involved," he said to Jack and made a move towards the parlor's front desk under which resided this gleaming silver cattle prod. Some recent losers in the back were getting ready for a poor man's thrill ride. What Lucky would do was walk the sonofabitch around the corner and shock him there. If he didn't shut up after that probably something else far worse would be done to him. He couldn't for himself abide this sort of

extended jackassery in his establishment that had after all welcomed this man in, accepted his business, and honored its commitments to him (the parlor was an honest one and would have paid up if it was obliged to do so). Sore losers were sore losers and their punishment would be to live with themselves and their demons. But if others got the wrong idea about this establishment's integrity, Lucky might have to track down this S.O.B. where he lived and do what came naturally to him in such situations. Not precisely legal, regardless he certainly couldn't have anybody questioning his establishment's honesty as it would guarantee a shutdown within a few weeks that the media got wind of it. Thus arose the imperative to be vigilant against slander. It was part of the business, of operating in what might be rightly called a gray market. A gray proprietor's word was his only hedge against disaster. It was the only real equity he had.

As for the acid attack, the question at hand, Lucky's parting piece of advice to Jack would be for him to wait as long as possible before he made a decision about it.

"Remember, that there's nothing that you've done wrong up until the point you cock your arm back to throw," he said to him. "At the very least you play hard to get with this towelhead," he said. "The price I think can only increase. You don't need to make a decision right away. If he starts to put pressure on you, there's your answer and you should hang up on him immediately."

*Good advice*, Jack thought, but, just as Lucky had pointed out, he had likely already decided on a course of action. Sometimes a man asked for advice because he don't know what to do, but often he did so because he'd already decided what to do and wanted to be talked out of the decision. But Lucky Murchison had no intention of talking anybody out of anything ever. He saw the need for the committing of certain evil acts

in this life and he left it to the individual charged with committing it to decide whether or not in this particular circumstance it was warranted. Can't do the time, don't do the crime so to speak. Unlike Jack, Lucky was relatively free of the compulsions that forged a criminal mindset. He had gained the perspective required to be philosophical about it. There was nothing particularly elevated, nothing sacrosanct about innocence as far as he was concerned. As all individuals would under the right circumstances take to a life of crime. On the other hand, there was a definite attribute to human striving that could only be described as evil. He had seen it himself all these years interred in Chino. And probably a man would sleep a little better at night putting a certain distance between himself and objectively evil men. They were the sort who you usually had to kill to remove from your life once they had their hooks into your side.

It's the drugs that drove Jack's decision-making solely nowadays. He realized this at one level but was at a complete loss to do anything about it for all the obvious reasons. For him the working definition of an addict was when he realized he had a problem with his drug of choice but was at a loss to do anything about it. So many of these twelve step brochures that he sent away for were gathering dust in the upper drawer of his desk in Little Ethiopia. Much to his chagrin one of them had been open on his desk when Khan had stepped in that day. An upturned bottle shown pouring into a sewer grate in silhouette was on the cover. Its contents couldn't have been missed right from where Khan sat.

Maybe not a full-blown addict like he imagined all the residents of skid row were but Jack Hameister felt himself approaching rock bottom. The problem with being addicted to blow was that it provided the user with a heightened (and therefore false) sense of

confidence. Probably it was much worse than Jack had ever suspected. Simply because when high or when he was about to get high the expansive sense of possibility that the drug gifted its users with could not totally erase the gnawing dread that arose with it. There were physical problems that he was experiencing daily that he had convinced himself somehow had nothing to do with the ingestion of cocaine. A constant pain just where his liver was located indicated that a doctor's intervention was required rapidly. His nose ached and bled where the septum was slowly being eaten away by the powder's residue.

Probably brain-damaged as well, because of late he constantly was getting lost on the way to work and sometimes coming back home as well.

In the North Hollywood complex that Jack Hameister called home many of the apartments looked alike from the outside owing to the numbers on many of the doors had either fallen off like so many scabs off a scraped knee or were stolen for the tiny bit of precious metal contained in them. Sometimes he would enter an unlocked door and find himself in what amounted to a parallel universe until he got his bearings straight. In one apartment, for example, there was food on the stove that had been prepared in advance of whoever had intended to enter. The toys of young children littered the shag pile carpet of another. Having kicked one of them over carelessly once set Jack to wondering the name of his own child. He had lost contact with her years back since relocating to his present residence. Rather than entering the wrong apartment, perhaps he had been transported back in time to a place where he had been a reasonably upstanding citizen. Maybe he was still in this place, this complex that overlooked a parking lot which was a perfect landing spot for felons trying to be reabsorbed back into society and illegals hiding out in

groups of four or five. The provisional existence which had been forced upon them all had caused frayed nerves even for those who were used to a life full of privation and danger.

Always at times like these he would apologize vociferously whether or not somebody was in the room with him to hear it and back out of the strange apartment gingerly.

“I don’t know why it is,” he said an hour later to his present roomie, Jane Harley, an actor/actress on the verge of a life transformation, “they don’t just put numbered stickers on the motherfucking doors. They don’t have to fancy it up,” he said, “but just a numbered sticker maybe. You can buy those at a hardware store. Just something so people maybe with a little too much to drink could make it home at night and find the right door on the first try. Just a sign that made these places seem more like home than they do now.”

According to Jack, in his three years at this residence he had wandered into the wrong residence at least twenty times. And each time was more surprising and embarrassing than the previous one.

“’I’m gonna go out to the hardware store and buy a sticker myself,” he said to Jane claiming that the wrath of the landlord didn’t bother him at all. If that fat Greek wanted to come and tear it off let him, Jack said. Because he would be there waiting for him with a list of grievances about the apartment. The landlord sprayed for roaches, for example, but not enough to keep the skulking black beasts completely at bay. Some of the repairs to the kitchen and bathroom Jack had to execute himself at his own expense. He couldn’t really abide many of his neighbors even though this wasn’t the landlord’s fault. He was as dirty as them absolutely. But when even the UPS driver was getting confused about who was who around here it was time to act. Never knew when

somebody’s truly valuable material would fall into the wrong hands because of it. Residents in this complex by and large didn’t have so many valuables to purloin but you never knew when this might change. Neighborhoods rose and fell in this part of the world constantly. Eventually North Hollywood would be the hip address in Los Angeles. And then shit of real value would be constantly mis-delivered and those in charge of such details would be forced to pay the price.

Sometimes Jack was the loser regarding such mistakes. Sometimes he was its beneficiary.

“It arrived two hours ago,” Jane said to Jack in that practiced breathy voice of his that made Jack think of Marilyn Monroe in full seduction mode. Or maybe Marilyn in seduction mode when suffering from severe bronchitis and/or tracheal infections. All the hormone therapy hadn’t taken completely or at least spread up to Jane’s vocal cords. She mentioned that there was a separate procedure post-op in which the cords could be shaved to raise the frequency. Or something. There was a type of poison supposedly that could be injected superficially into the throat to raise the voice slightly. The muscles of the throat would constrict causing a little bitty squeak to emerge. Jane didn’t think it would be that great a task in comparison to so much else. She didn’t think it was a major cause for fretting over once held in comparison to so much else that was needing to be taking care of .by her in the coming year.

The object in question was a package mis-delivered via UPS to this residence. The package contained several video cassettes devoid of labeling on their exterior. Of course they had been opened by Jane Harley upon its having been dropped off. As around here to be in possession of a certain object was to claim ownership of it. Jack was convinced that over the years so many packages that had been his

had been stolen from him. So he assumed turnabout was fair play.

"Just pretend it's yours," he said to Jane when asked by her what she should do if confronted by a neighbor. He told her they should know the rules. At least those that have lived around here long enough should know them. Those with hurt feelings should simply wait for something that belonged to another to fall into their laps. For there was reciprocity in this life. It was an impromptu form of Christmas experienced by those without the means to pack up and move. Nobody should have been upset that this was the case. Potential renters should have seen the complete absence of identifiers for the apartments and assumed this would happen to them at some point.

They had a VHS player that actually worked but Jane hadn't considered plying their "gifts" yet she said, simply because of her lack of interest in them.

"Porn leaves me cold," she said to Jack noting that as of 1995 it was the only growth industry in the Valley at least as attested to by a recent article in *Newsweek*. Well, to each his or her own, Jane thought. For herself and in all candor Jane had too many issues to deal with to really be consumed with sex in that way that would lead somebody to watch porn. The gender reassignment surgery that she had signed up for was taking place exactly two months from now in a barn outside of Cheyenne, Wyoming. The reason for this was that at the time Cheyenne, Wyoming was the city of residence for the lone American surgeon who performed such an operation. He was a veterinarian. Thus, you see, the reason for Jane's distractedness was entirely rational.

The vet didn't give money back guarantees. He was a nice enough man at least to judge by their phone conversations, but he didn't give guarantees.

For the largest part of his career he found that his patients were easy enough to mollify without them.

Under the best of circumstances it was no party being a woman trapped in a man's body but having to be decamped here in this North Hollywood shithole temporarily with a roommate as troubled as Jack Hameister only contributed to Jane's anxiety. Strangely it was the phenomenon of the regularly misplaced packages that ate at her more than anything else. To her it seemed to be a cosmic indictment about her own relatively amorphous state. Between genders so to speak, just as she was between a true address.

"I think what we should all do, is stage a rent strike until the problem is fixed," Jane said. "We can put our own addresses on our doors and dare the landlord to take them off. We could call the local news crews over to see for themselves. Or maybe there's a municipal authority with whom to appeal. We could do all of these things in the space of a few days," she said to Jack. "And one of these or all of these should take care of the problem."

Born and raised in the upscale Orange County enclave of Manhattan Beach, Jane Harley was marked as an outsider here in North Hollywood because of such positivity.

"Around here," Jack Hameister told her, "things don't necessarily get better right away. They usually get worse quickly but they never get better quickly," he said. "So people by-and-large sit on their grievances until they're forgotten. There's not a lot of good that can be done by just speaking out about matters. So it's easier to leave then put up a fight."

By this time Jack had retrieved what he called his smoking jacket in which resided a little baggie of blow fastened in each pocket with a bit of only half sticky duct tape. He was by degrees calming down

considerably. Even the fateful conversation of that day with Maidul Khan had faded from memory.

Really, he didn't see the crisis involved in getting somebody else's mail every now and again so long as you were prudent enough to have held whatever package you were about to receive at the post office. Of course it was annoying. But then again so many things in this life were that way, the results of insufficient funds that bred disrespect within those service providers you counted on to provide a certain standard of living. Once you become poor, Jack found, eventually you get used to the disrespectful treatment on a conscious level. Unconsciously of course it still burned in your guts until (and maybe past) the moment of death. A former member of the middle class straight society like Jack would never really internally accept being pauperized. But at least he had gotten used to it. He was always scheming to overthrow the status quo in this regard. It was business as usual for him. He was looking to get back in the game so to speak, even though he sensed his downfall was mostly his fault.

While at the *Times* he had sometimes been referred to as an ace reporter, and sometimes by people other than himself. Also they called him Jack the Hamster even before his unfortunate business cards were printed. This was simply because of his annoying proclivity to horde information and in particular sources from prying eyes such as colleagues. The Pulitzer nomination in 1980 exposing the extra-legal tactics of several members of the LAPD was in Jack's rear view mirror by now. It had been five years since the paper's circulation had increased despite the city's growing numbers. People charged the *LA Times* alternately with being too elitist, too populist, too lightweight, too pretentious, and always an institution decades past its prime (which was incontestably true if taken in terms of pure circulation,

technological innovation, and political influence). The day of the powerful city daily was long since over. But it would take another seven years for people supposedly in the know to find this out. As of now Jack was a voice crying in the wilderness about this subject. People figured he had sour grapes about the way it ended for him.

"When they shit canned me," he said to Jane Harley after reclining in his favorite chair in the living room which was situated less than five feet from the television set, "they didn't offer excuses. Now all they offer is excuses when somebody is let go," he said to her. "They're worried about this so-called world wide web hurting circulation which to all the brass at the newspaper is like worrying about little green men invading the earth. When it gets there we'll all deal with it they say," he told Jane. "The Chicano population of this city never read the paper and they're worried about that too. But you know, in 1975 when I started there, racism was the coin of the realm," Jack said. "A Chicano with an unfamiliar face'd walk through the door and he'd be immediately tossed by these burly Irish rent-a-cops standing at the front entrance," he said. "Just the way it was way back when. So you can't blame the Mexicans for taking these things to heart now that their ranks are needed to improve the numbers."

The day they fired Jack, he recalled, there was only the in-house security was present to strong arm him. This light touch was likely done as recompense for so many years of faithful service. They stood back in the newsroom's aisles with arms folded while he cleaned out his desk. Not a lot of tears shed on either side if he recalled. The fact of the matter was his dismissal was long overdue.

"I started doing lines just outside of meetings, opening poppers just outside of these official business-type meetings," he said to Jane once the boob tube

was turned on. “That marked me as somebody with a problem in their eyes.”

Jack and Jane didn’t have cable so they were forced to make do with the local network broadcasts with its trademark mixture of sentimentality and sensationalism. Nowadays he watched the local news mostly skimming the content for recent items involving home break-ins and violent office place conflicts. This was illicit activity that a private detective might exploit for profit. Corporations needed background checks run on prospective employees in the wake of a shoot-‘em-up. Of late he had started being proactive in his marketing to these firms based on such news reports. He would claim that he was Los Angeles’ premiere investigator of such matters and created a list of references to support this contention.

The gist of the conversation was that he deserved to be fired even though even though emotionally he couldn’t come right out and say it at this point. The blow still had its hooks in him and to admit that he deserved to be fired was also to admit that he had a problem with drugs. The cocaine-produced a tide of neurotransmitters that flooded his brain over twenty years. They wouldn’t let the words be formed on his mind’s tablet. He was constantly making excuses for his own aberrant behavior but it wasn’t him talking. He was possessed in a way just like the little girl in *The Exorcist*. He didn’t have a real sense that he was in control of much of anything nowadays and this had contributed to so much of the anxiety he experienced, that dread rising up from nowhere in the manner of the Loch Ness monster from an impenetrable bog, devoid of rational explanation or intention, purely malevolent simply because of its inexplicable nature and overpowering in presence.

He thought the drug use would take care of itself simply because his body eventually would degrade to a point that would allow them to be used.

“The way to a man’s heart is through his liver,” was always one of his witticisms routinely muttered in Jane’s presence. But, realize, as a gateway to happiness the liver had always proven notoriously unreliable and prone to total collapse over time. As wages for his own sin, Jack had contracted a strain of hepatitis C that might lead to his death years from now. Didn’t know it yet, but there it was. And let’s face it, he probably wouldn’t have stopped anyway if he knew the exact moment death would occur. Drug addiction was like running downhill in a dream where to quit or even to slow up was the same as taking a violent chance. His only instinct was to try and sustain his present physical state for as long as possible and maybe even increase it if he could. He was full of rationalizations in this regard whenever he thought about it at all.

Most of the time it was a matter of course for him. It was like taking one breath after another. Where even thinking about it was seemingly a demented state of affairs. It was a type of cogitation that could lead to death simply by contemplating it for too long and too directly.

If the way to a man’s heart was through his liver, then the liver was what must be preserved at all costs. No matter what sort of beating it took and for how long.

“There’s probably less than a tenth of a gram in this bag in real terms,” he said to Jane as he leaned over the metal TV table and began to snort. Here he was telling her that all the impurities that the coke was cut with actually made the product less dangerous. He didn’t buy the reasoning that all the crap the product’s illicit supply chain had mixed in made snorting it more insalubrious than the fabled

pharmaceutical grade blow that was as puffy and light as cloud cover. It never occurred to Jack that baking soda or talcum powder could ravage the liver and the nose and the brain as much as the cocaine that was allegedly the product's main ingredient.

It was his dependency that blinded him to these possibilities. He wasn't getting as high from the blow anymore so he rationalized he was using it in moderation. He didn't think using cocaine in moderation to be especially dangerous. He thought circumstances and his own failing health would save him from going over the edge completely.

Now on the TV was the canned entrance unto the KABC evening news. Millard Grimsby was off tonight and some olive-skinned cat in a toupee was subbing for him, struggling with every word. Jane was in the kitchen L making lentil soup for them both. Her mind was elsewise occupied with thoughts of the wrongly delivered package. She couldn't help thinking that it was a message of some kind meant for the world. Or maybe some type of threat aimed at her personally that would take years to figure out exactly. She couldn't believe as Jack claimed that such a mis-delivery was some sort of repeated coincidence that happened semi-regularly. She had been in this place all of two months and she couldn't believe it had happened even this once.

"I think I'm starting to build up a tolerance," Jack said as the two lines he had just snorted had no effect at all. The fidgety intensity that fell upon a cocaine maven separated momentarily from his buzz wasn't any sort of spectacle that one could behold for even a few seconds without feeling some empathy for the sufferer. It was like he was constantly receiving a series of shocks that would only end when he had enough blow inside him to set the brain's frayed neurons onto another path of endeavor temporarily. The nose began to run spontaneously when the blow

was in sight and the eyes bugged out of his skull slightly so that it seemed that he was making a funny face on purpose.

Sometimes Jack would snort at the office but generally he was afraid of being caught. So he would put a little in his car in case of emergency and the rest he'd use while at home. And if he needed to use while at the office, fuck it. He'd do his business on his desk and go home and vow to return to work some other time when he was feeling better.

Probably what was happening here was that his latest dealer was diluting the product even more, knowing that Jack was a hardcore user. Charge him more and continuously cut the shit until he was at some breaking point. SOP, my dear.

But a cokehead's breaking point in terms of abuse by his dealer was only past that moment where another, more ethical dealer could be located. Jack himself had long since despaired of an ethical dealer still existing in Los Angeles County. All the crack dealers had taken over the powdered cocaine business once a crackdown on their territory started. They were ghetto marketers. They didn't long after quality relationships with clients. It seemed the farthest thing actually from their minds.

Now, realize, the more Jack Hameister used the more his body suffered. And the more his body suffered the greater his need was for escape into drug use. The pain of existence was what drove men into the habit from the start. Nobody ever did anything self-destructive just for fun. Not really. Well, maybe a time or two at the most. After that it must be admitted it was all self-medicating. It was pathetic rather than ecstatic. All men were prisoners of their bodies. Drug addicts knew this above all.

This truth was self-evident but old Jack had not yet proceeded far enough into his misery spiral to realize

how pathetic he had become even by his own admittedly shabby pre-addiction standards.

"I'm not believing any of this," Jack said when hearing the news on channel 7 of yet another Marian Vision in the greater Los Angeles area, this time in the back of a Seven-Eleven parking lot in Ojai. According to the reporter on-scene, a crowd had formed in the lot with candles keeping vigil on what would seem to an objective spectator to be a rust stain in the back of a filthy dumpster. Americans were in an eschatological mood lately, it seemed. Jack at least had a reason for why this might be for him. He didn't believe really in the need for an afterlife as the rudiments of both heaven and hell seemed for him so present in this life that the concept in the abstract seemed beside the point. But here the believers were regardless. He tried to change the channel but discovered the clicker was across the room so gave up. These dead-eyed Catholics gave him the creeps big time. More than their servile expressions, what offended him most was the egotistical nature of their faith. Their desire to look upon the Savior's face while still alive struck Jack as presumptuous in the extreme. They could find the Holy Virgin in any type of stain present in this world so it seemed. They didn't need justification from the church or even from God himself to do so. They could look at the pattern their shredded wheat formed in a bowl and find in it the face of the Holy Mother. But somehow they never asked themselves why it was she was appearing to them just at this moment in time. They never asked themselves what was so special about their lives to have these apparitions unfold before them as if handpicked in a celestial talent search.

Jack thought that such presumptuousness would be the death of us all. Moreover, it seemed useless to him as investigatory information. None of it had anything to do with criminality even slightly.

Thus in the midst of his frustration while the low-level buzz of impure cocaine in his body began to agitate for some sort of action taken, the decision was arrived at to take Professor Khan's money and do what was required of him if only to keep mind and body alive temporarily.

"I need it to get clean," he said to Jane even as he hadn't spelled out explicitly what exactly he was talking about to her. Well, of course, treatment centers cost money. But then again so did six grams of blow of a purity that movie stars were used to. He couldn't by rights sentimentalize any part of his addiction anymore. But he would do what was required of him to survive. There was not lot of painful moral vacillating when you have a drug habit. As Lucky pointed out repeatedly, all hemming and hawing was just boilerplate regardless used by weaklings. Jack had to convince himself he was some sort of normal person capable of moral reasoning before he acted in the traditional robotic manner of all drug addicts. The damning action would override the saving supposition if it predated it. He needed to make a case for himself as a non-addict even as he was in the midst of cultivating his habit excessively.

The misappropriated VHS tape that he had intended to play by this point was on the other side of the room in the envelope in which it had arrived.

"Lookit, if you want to eat you can eat. Then we can watch later."

Jack said this to Jane who had no intention of watching whatever it was on the tape. It seemed to her like a bit of voyeurism. The lentil soup indeed was intended for somebody else too. She had no intention of staying in this apartment any longer than necessary. She had over time grown averse to Jack's company. She was interested now in getting on with her new life.

She didn't belong here hardly.

# Chapter Two → (April, 1996)

The tapes Jane Harley was feeling guilty over were scheduled to be delivered two doors down unto a man who, through fate and circumstance, had lost the thread of his own narrative years ago. Subsequently he was open to new identities. He was a blank slate primed for professorial scribbling. He was constantly seeking a new direction for himself through somebody else's notion of reality.

He had for the past several months experienced freedom in an undiluted form and found it intolerable. He didn't want to live with the dread that direct self-examination brought him even for a little while. He had the old God-hunger which was the hunger for oblivion. He once was a Catholic, but now was devoid of dogmatic reasoning to a painful degree. Presently he wanted to be somebody's subject, a modern day vassal. He wanted to be one tiny voice crying out amongst millions of bellicose voices, devoid of what he saw as the stain of individuality. He wanted to be both ignominious and overpowering at the same time. He wanted to drown in the experience of belonging which was a sensation he had never felt even slightly.

He wanted to be taken by transcendence, to be raped by it constantly until the experience of rape and the experience of ordinary perception had bled together completely. He had no self-respect left, or maybe none to begin with. There was a death within life which was synonymous with absolute religious devotion. He wanted to be like the Benedictine monks of the Middle Ages and stare balefully through the material world. He had had it, had had it, had *motherfucking had it* with the modern

world. Presently he longed for the death within life that was the experience of profound faith. He wanted to be delivered to that state forthwith like a Christmas card that arrived in November, too prematurely to be taken as truly sincere by that person who was to receive it.

This man, whose given name was Robert Lacombe, but sometimes had waking dreams in which he was called something different, had a small Siamese cat named Benjamin Pike who came and went from the tiny apartment as it pleased. He had an alter-ego or imaginary friend named Simon Tor that kept similarly mysterious hours too though for reasons likely altogether different than Benjamin's. Simon wouldn't admit where he went to when out of Robert's sight. Being imaginary of course any answer he provided would have been entirely fallacious. He seem to possess secrets beyond the grasping of his creator. But this likely meant that Robert Lacombe was truly insane rather than merely delusional. He had crossed a threshold when his own projection started lying to him. And there was no turning back now.

To those few people who actually knew Robert Lacombe this phenomenon was hardly surprising though still depressing to behold. Imaginary friends like Simon Tor after all tended to appear only when the real ones had flown from the world for good. It was hard to make friends after all when you're so weird even street people shy away from you and scream at you to keep your hands in your pockets as you pass them by. It was hard to connect with real human beings when so many of them were the source of your torments, not any sort of creature you could identify with hardly and ultimately befriend as if you and them were kindred spirits.

The need to create human contact by inventing it thus was a side effect of the denial of real human contact for somebody. If Robert Lacombe ever gained a true friend, Simon Tor might vanish into the metaphysical haze he tended to wrap himself in so often. Regardless of Robert's psychological state, Benjamin Pike would remain slurping milk in the cleaned ashtray that Robert used as a bowl next to the refrigerator. Despite his standoffishness nature, Benjamin Pike unlike Simon Tor liked it here. A lot of critters in the corners to keep his interest up was one

reason why. And Robert never had scolded him for any offense large or small.

A disturbing tendency of Simon Tor's of late was to offer advice to Robert Lacombe of a type that could seemingly land him in trouble if it was followed even generally.

"If I were you," Simon Tor told Robert one day in the languid style of his while squatting on the living room couch, "I'd confront that coon when he next appears and smash in his face with that hammer in your drawer."

Always blithe when speaking, nevertheless here was Simon goading Lacombe on to an act of felonious assault against a man who had done him no wrong. It had come out of nowhere. And Lacombe was having a hard time wrapping his head around the reasons why he said it.

Because just then he didn't have any hard evidence against the residence's African-American mailman regarding his thievery, let alone the moral justification to follow through with an act of violence meant as retribution.

"I talked to him once already about it," Robert said to Simon Tor about his encounter with the mailman, Sharif Johnson, several days before when seemingly just by chance their paths had coincided. "I asked him whether he had seen it."

Five days after its expected arrival date the package with the tapes in it was officially missing and there were very few other suspects to turn to at the moment. Robert Lacombe had very limited exposure to black people thus far in his life. But he assumed all the stereotypes were true or else they wouldn't have been as persistent as they were. He assumed that people didn't lie in an en masse way for the pleasure of perpetuating a racial stereotype.

In his twenty second conversation with Sharif in fact Robert hadn't talked about the package's lapsed delivery date at all. Rather he had asked after the possibility that perhaps at a certain point and over the course of days the mailman and the package might have come in contact with each other.

"I said to him 'have you happened upon it,'" Robert told a presently loose-limbed Simon Tor splayed out on the room's couch staring at the blank TV. "I explained to him it's a package of deep sentimental value. I explained that it

was days past due and I lost the address to send away for another one."

Actually the address for the Heaven's Gate Information Society through which the tapes were ordered was up on the apartment's refrigerator, having been cut out a month prior from the ads in back of *Omni* magazine then laminated at a personal expense of eight dollars ninety five cents.

"I felt the need to do a disservice and lie simply to get my point across," Robert said to Simon. "At the very least he knows I'm on to him," he said to him. "There was sarcasm in my voice through which I let it be known I was on to him. I told him I come out to the mailboxes every day and look around. I made an inference to my being able to observe the mailboxes from a hidden place which should let him know that he was being watched at all times."

In reality Sharif Johnson knew no such thing. As he had kept his headphones attached to his Walkman on the entire time this "conversation" of Robert's was on-going. To him this was just another dummy complaining about the mail service. But this time Sharif didn't unload on the motherfucker so much as mumble vague assents and ignore him completely. He had already been disciplined once for such an outburst months ago. Already he had been told in no uncertain terms the next stop for him was the sorting room downtown where there was a pink-faced supervisor on your ass at all hours of the day and the mail never stopped.

Not that it would have made any difference of course as the package's mis-delivery was entirely accidental and not anything he could cop to if he had wanted.

"I saw a fearful look in his eyes," Robert Lacombe said to Simon Tor and noticed not for the first time since that morning Simon had simply disappeared into the ether. Not so unusual behavior really this, coming usually during those times when Lacombe began to fixate on the real world as opposed to matters of a purely hypothetical nature. It might have been Simon was offended by such worldly concerns or merely its presence was antithetical to his already provisional existence. So lost in thought he didn't know at such times when he had crossed over into favoring

one mode of communication over the next. He didn't know what he had done to make Simon Tor run away from him.

The fearful look from Sharif was in fact a moment's trepidation about what he would be forced to do to this weird cracker with the Moe Howard bowl cut if he drew any closer to him.

"Weird hands like they was dipped in flour but they wasn't," Sharif told his wife after work when recounting for her the incident that never was. He didn't or couldn't bear up to this nonsense for very long and still remain the model of rectitude everybody at work knew and respected. Too much of this shit happening on a daily basis now. He didn't know where it came from and what to do to turn it off.

Fortunately for them both, Robert Lacombe ran out of things to say halfway before Sharif was forced to turn his back on him and risk aggravating him even further.

"Everything is on the table," he said to Simon upon the occasion of his return when once again the option of going upside Sharif's head with a hammer was raised. Lookit: he was not a man prone to violence. But there's only so much (or so little) that he could take regarding the absconding of his private property. There were issues regarding personal dignity that were involved. When you're stolen from there's not merely a loss of property but a loss of a sense of security. All of this needed to be weighed against any particular action taken by Lacombe. He needed to decide for himself just how violated he was before continuing. He could include a variety of choices based on that judgment. But he needed to first consider what it cost to go out and attack a man who for all he knew might be completely innocent.

In Robert's fantasy life he was a merciless avenger just like Bruce Willis in *Die Hard*.

"If I had a gun," he said to a suddenly attentive Simon, "I would have no compunction against using it on somebody if three conditions were met."

Slowly Robert slinked over to the peephole to take another look-see near the mailbox. Sharif was long gone for the day so there was no real imperative to observe. The behavior was performed half-consciously, however, as a method of helping him gather his thoughts. In reality there was never anything to see. It made him feel more powerful

slightly to observe somebody un detected as if he was The Invisible Man.

Condition One for Lacombe to commit murder was that he would be attacked in some manner by the murderee without provocation.

“I would first make sure that there is nothing I had done to upset somebody inadvertently,” he said to Simon Tor. Simon Tor had sometimes green eyes sometimes blue eyes sometimes brown eyes that tended to lose focus at times like these when Robert was running on.

So the question immediately arose: what were Robert’s checks to make sure he hadn’t provoked somebody inadvertently?

“I have developed a personal inventory for this,” he told Simon Tor, claiming that it could be run through in less than twenty seconds. People from other cultures, for example, were offended by different things than Americans. So it was up to Robert to make sure he hadn’t crossed any line inadvertently like maybe talking too loudly or using words in English that might be taken as different words in another language. He could run through his checklist and make a decision quickly as he might. It wouldn’t be any sort of intellectual game that he would have to think about especially deeply at all.

Condition Two, Robert Lacombe said, was that after the initial attack there would be reasonable cause to think this person meant to do Robert further grievous bodily harm.

“The speech I give at this point is always the same,” he told Simon, “taken from the *Star Trek* episode 18, (production episode 19) “Arena” where Kirk and the Gorn captain fight a death match on an abandoned planet. *Peace is an alternative*, Kirk tells the Gorn, *not the only way but in this instance the best way*. And if that fails,” he said to Simon, “I move on to Condition Three and unlatch the safety on my gun.”

Condition Three would be met only if the attacker physically reminded Robert of somebody who had given him a hard time in this past. It didn’t have to be a physical resemblance per se but his presence had to ring a bell with him deep down. He had his reasons for establishing this condition. He had vendettas against so many people that vendetta-by-proxy seemed an acceptable alternative.

“But there are so many memories to call upon, so many monsters to slay,” Robert said to Simon along these lines and was regretful immediately about this candor. It wasn’t really any of Simon Tor’s business how much he had been bullied in the past, for example. He had usually been able to deny the amount of abuse suffered especially during adolescence or rationalize violence against him in terms of various “friends” playing “pranks.” In fact when he was a junior in high school Robert had been beaten up so badly by two amphetamine-inspired jocks he had been hospitalized for three months and was forced to repeat the eleventh grade, albeit via self-study which was also the manner he finished out high school, devoid either of friends or any social contacts except for his chemistry professor father who was even weirder and more emotionally closed than Robert and was in truth no company at all.

Only at times like this on the verge of satisfying Condition Three, imagining acts of violent retribution against his tormentors, did the unvarnished truth appear to Robert Lacombe, as a kind of amphibious bog monster breaking the water’s surface for a brief replenishment of oxygen. Couldn’t dress himself properly and this norm of social behavior had been utterly lost on his dad who favored stained cardigan sweaters half-hidden under waist-length white hair, unfitting brown corduroy’s and sandals stitched together with duct tape or adhesive entirely less reliable than this. Robert’s haircuts were few and far between and when undertaken usually self-administered as he had an aversion to being touched by the callous local barbers of the area. More so the rare subjects that roused him to loquaciousness were devoid of interest for most of his peer group. Robert Lacombe loved science fiction, comic book dramas, and, more than anything, speculation on the existence of extra-terrestrial life presiding either on this planet or some other, as it has been said, in a galaxy far, far away. Seemingly innocuous at least to an adult, somehow demonstrating interest in such subject matter seemed an incitement to violence for so many suburbanized white teenagers in the late 1970’s. They seemed to be personally offended that somebody would have interests that departed from the gratifications of the body. The proverbial holy troika of sex, drugs, and rock-

and-roll, so to speak. Robert Lacombe on the contrary had always hated his body. He viewed it as an impediment to a greater level of intellectual attainment as well as a burden to bear prior to its withering away. He saw it as his enemy as opposed to a vessel of his deliverance, a type of sea worthy canoe that given the right current was capable of drifting all the way to heaven's rocky shoals.

People seemed to hate Robert for being himself, or hate him at least for being something different from what they were. Only in his thirties did it occur to Lacombe that he should hate them back for their small-brain simian ways. And so nowadays he was always entering into these self-administered trances imagining a gun in his hand. But there were always three conditions that needed to be met before he would use it on anybody. Unlike them his vengeance had a rational character. He needed to know that they deserved extinction. The bullies of this world were deserving of death. He needed to know that they were (or at least resembled) such evil people before he put a hole in them.

When and if he killed Sharif Johnson, for example, it would be with an absolute certainty that justice was being done. Robert was not a bully and did not isolate individuals for punishment without being entirely aware that they were guilty of heinous behavior both above and ancillary to the laws of United States and California.

"I can see a situation in which conditions one and two would be met in this instance," he said to a green-eyed Simon Tor who of late had migrated to the couch's edge to hear this statement of purpose. Of course this was all theoretical violence he was proposing but in a super-rational creature like Robert Lacombe theory must undergird practice always. So it wasn't empty bragging with him, at least Simon Tor didn't think it was. But Robert's physical interface with reality (his body) always seemed perniciously non-threatening even to Simon. There must be allowances made to think of him as a murderer. One must believe the will to murder was enough to create a murderer in even the meekest of men. One must believe that many people were capable of overcoming their physical circumstances to believe in Robert Lacombe as a serial killer.

The problem for Robert in this instance was in the satisfaction of Condition Three. For Sharif Johnson with his slight build and slight overbite and large slightly almond-shaped yellow eyes reminded him not of any of the dozens of bullies from his youth and young adulthood (and older adulthood, too, it should be mentioned), but of David Carlisle, a friendly boy from high school with whom Robert used to exchange *Battlestar Galactica* trading cards with underneath the bleachers of the football stadium hiding from the tortures of gym class.

Two Captain Apollo's equaling one Starbuck and three Xylon foot soldiers, if Lacombe recalled correctly based on the arbitrary rate of exchange they had established, written down, and cited at the start of every bartering session. Robert didn't think David ever got the best of him on a deal and indeed he seemed always ready to yield in this regard, to give Robert an Apollo "on credit" in exchange for future considerations, such as a Scotty or a plastic R2-D2 with one leg pulled off it that had been fished out of the bottom of a Sugar Smacks package two years earlier and not having survived the ravages of time easefully. Always amenable to such seemingly one sided trades at the time, Robert couldn't help but be contemptuous of David Carlisle, attributing such generosity on his part as either foolishness or lack of negotiating skills. Looking back on it now he could see David simply trying to make a friend of Robert with his one sided trades. Something of a dweeb himself, David lacked the social skills to create a context where the gesture would not be misunderstood and Robert lacked the emotional skills to not misunderstand the gesture regardless of the context. So it was that around the time of his junior year beat down David had drifted from Robert's life completely. Only during the past few months, coincident with the appearance of Simon Tor, did Robert Lacombe begin to realize what had happened. Constantly he thought of David Carlisle and what he would say to him. Likely he would say nothing if the meeting actually came to pass. He was that hard a case. He had lost access to the better side of himself. He had long since lost the access to say anything to any real human being any longer beyond the banalities of ordering from a restaurant menu or reporting on a problem at work.

But look, it must be noted that Sharif Johnson wasn't David Carlisle and Robert's Third Condition must surely be recognized, if only by a person so committed to logical discourse, as profoundly irrational as well as fucking silly.

"The coon's a coon a coon a coon," Simon Tor with the light brown hair told Robert Lacombe articulating Robert Lacombe's unspoken thought. Lacombe didn't believe deep down that black people had full control of their violent impulses or they were intelligent enough to control their own impulses for thievery and violence especially against whites.

So it was that Robert recalled a scene that had transpired on the bus he took every weekday to the studio he worked for. This was of two black youth extinguishing their lighted cigarettes on the back of the exposed neck of a pregnant looking white woman and laughing about it for every stop afterward.

"People all looked the other way like they didn't know it was happening," Lacombe said to Simon Tor, once more vanished and moved into his kitchen L for sustenance.

Nothing to eat in here except for the several large boxes of Fruit Loops he bought from the twenty-four hour Ralph's down the way. He shopped at three in the morning so as to avoid human contact as much as possible. Days like this where work was not a requirement Robert would subsist on Fruit Loops singularly taking large handfuls whenever hunger pangs struck throughout the day and forgoing the milk. If there were Oreo cookies to eat with it he'd eat the Oreo cookies, crushing them in his palm along with the cereal or maybe scrapping the cream off the black cookies with his bottom teeth then placing each black circle on the roof of his mouth to let it grow sufficiently mushy until he could swallow them without chewing. Robert Lacombe hated chewing things generally and most of his food choices were made with the notion that they could be allowed to melt in his mouth to the degree that no chewing would be required. There were vitamin deficiencies that had developed in Robert as a result of this behavior. But he ate what he liked nowadays and would take a broom every so often to all the crumbs that had fallen to the floor as a result of his tastes.

He had a personal computer nowadays which had replaced the TV as his new obsession and he didn't like to be absent of its presence for more than a few hours at a go. This included the wee hours of the morning when more adjusted individuals were in the midst of their eight hour restorative bout of non-consciousness. Nowadays he'd sleep for about ninety minutes then rise and re-connect on-line via his 64kb modem. This device was supposed to guarantee an optimal web surfing experience but used via AOL it only frustrated Robert and set him to wondering what feats of technology might be available to him greater than his 24.95 a month dial-up account. AOL kept throwing him off in the midst of a session and this only strengthened his resolve to get back on all the more quickly. He took it personally. That computerized goodbye of AOL's as far as he was concerned was just another high school sayonara from somebody he was foolish enough to reach out to on a whim. He took it as a sign that whoever was on the other end of AOL had a personal animus against him even though he was paid in full. He was going to switch providers as soon as he found a better one. The rumors of DSL being available in the area by 1995 had turned out to be false. He was going to do research and switch to a company that wouldn't say *goodbye* constantly and disconnect him when he was in the middle of something.

But the question remained, if only for himself, what he was exactly trolling for on-line.

"It makes me feel better to do this," he said to Simon Tor once his mash-up of sugared cereal and Oreo centers had been consumed.

According to Simon Tor, the only recourse left for Robert was to take the aforementioned hammer in hand and administer rough justice.

"But I wouldn't expect it from somebody like you," he said to him. "You go sit there and stare into the computer and imagine yourself performing an important act. But in reality nobody will save you but yourself," he said. "You have no friends because everybody knows what a weakling you are. And they see what people do to you and are moved to do it to you as well. They can't help themselves. You'll never be happy until you can do things for yourself. And people won't respect you until they see that you've

become strong enough to stand up for yourself just for a time."

The website he was visiting more than any other of late was run by somebody who claimed to live in Canada. This person had documented all types of ways to do yourself in, the costs and the risks involved, and how you should exactly go about the task and what the steps were involved in knowing you were truly ready.

"I can see you have a lot of issues to work through," Karen Kaminkoff, a self-described doctor of holistic healing said to Robert Lacombe several days later upon the occasion of their latest therapy session at her strip mall office in West Hollywood. In the meantime a new set of Heaven's Gate tapes had been re-ordered. These sat in the two VCRs that were in the apartment stacked on top of each other growing slightly more tangled because of their constant relay over the many hours and days that Robert Lacombe had occupied the apartment alone.

Not having seen Karen in some time, Robert was here now simply because it was what was strongly recommended by the website, named *White Oleander*. The font that they used for the recommendation sported one inch high flashing purple lettering. There were a lot of words like "mandatory" and "important" in the communication. And Robert Lacombe was far too literal minded to omit a step in a written procedure. If Karen ever got around to asking why Robert had come he would simply invoke this website as the cause. He couldn't say anything beyond it, couldn't access his true feelings for why he was here if any existed. He assumed such matters were already known by her anyway. At root he believed he lacked an unconscious. He didn't believe he was capable of anything as baroque as a hidden motive.

To her credit Karen Kaminkoff hadn't asked him why he wanted to kill himself but merely invited him to speak about anything he wished. She had dealt with him before during a session of supposed therapy. She knew him as somebody with a type of affected personality. She wouldn't call it autism exactly. Merely she realized that something within Robert was critically askew. She knew enough not to push him at all when he really didn't want to be pushed.

She realized he was incapable of providing the answers either she or any other therapist sought.

The website had said (and thus he had faithfully reported) that before any implementation of suicide was undertaken, one should consult a shrink no fewer than on three separate occasions to make sure one was not in its words “killing yourself for the hell of it.”

“I don’t think that’s really been ascertained,” Robert told Karen once she finally asked him why he was here. So it had been Robert’s belief that any conclusion of the sort that Karen sought should have been reached after the therapy had been concluded not at its outset. Robert Lacombe was not an expert about such matters hardly so it seemed to him that was the logical conclusion. Because in a sense if one’s mental state could be diagnosed prior to any evaluative process, the problems that one experienced were likely too obvious to have required professional help in the first place. But, on the other hand, it seemed entirely possible to him that one could be so mentally deranged that it could be obvious at least to a professional at first sight. Robert couldn’t believe he was one of the people to be placed into that category. So for now it was his contention that Karen had just violated some protocol in saying what she had said. Must have had him confused with somebody altogether. Or maybe like so many others on planet earth she was just trying to get his goat.

When asked by Karen what he felt the goal of this therapy should be, he said to her that it was his sincerest wish that the therapy should concluded as swiftly as possible without broaching the subject of his imaginary companion, Simon Tor.

“I don’t believe he’s a real person especially,” he said to Karen of Simon even though on many occasions he clearly did. He didn’t think based on the requirements of this session, however, that Simon had anything to do with this. That was to say, he knew why Simon existed and he knew enough to resist many of the things he had to say. But nowadays Simon Tor seemed to come and go based on his own motives. And the fact that Karen kept bringing it up to him meant that she was trying to get under his skin. Simon didn’t exist to Robert. And if Karen wanted to question why he thought he didn’t exist maybe she should

go ask Simon Tor about it. Set up an appointment with him just like she had for him. He wouldn't be that hard to reach, he didn't think. It wouldn't be some kind of guessing game to know where he was hiding out for example or where he could be reached by mail.

It's not that he ever listened to any of Simon's advice anyway. This was because he had to admit it seemed to offer more in a spirit of antagonism than any legitimate impulse to be helpful. Moreover, Simon didn't seem prepared to stick around and see how his advice might turn out. He didn't seem to have Robert's best interests at heart in other words. He seemed to be a more or less stranger to him at times and the advice he offered was entirely for his self-gratification solely.

The advice Simon proffered about taking a hammer to the side of Sharif Johnson's cranium was admitted to Karen if only to demonstrate that he had no intention of heeding it ever. He thought it was just a bit of mischievousness on his part rather. He thought Simon might have been legitimately offended if he went ahead with the act. He thought at the very least Simon would upbraid him for being foolish if he had.

"If he doesn't want to come back," he said to Karen Kaminkoff when the notion had been discussed of banishing Simon from his apartment altogether. "Then that would be entirely up to him," he told her. But really he had no control over a real person let alone Simon Tor. It was Richard's conviction after all that he was not of this world. He didn't believe any sort of ordinary human restraint would function with him. He didn't believe he was somebody to listen to logic.

Now, it must be admitted there were long stretches of his life when he had actually forgotten Simon existed. Over time he had come to rationalize his presence as more or less an eccentricity of his. Unlike Karen, he didn't think Simon Tor's presence was anything to become overly concerned about. He didn't see him as some sort of confirmation of madness but some sort of preventer of it. In that Robert always felt a little better with someone to talk to beside the apartment walls.

"I didn't think the punishment met with the crime," was why he claimed to discount Simon's advice right away

concerning the matter of the vanishing package. At this point he cited the Three Conditions to Karen. As he had already stated the real reason for his visitation to her was to satisfy the criteria stated on the whiteoleander.com. This too needed some sort of clarification on his part as he was in no way on the verge of suicide. But he was considering his options to an enhanced and active degree presently. He was trying his best to be as rational about his predicament as he could under such trying circumstances.

After the therapy sessions with the trained psychotherapist, the website advised that a type of written certification regarding being of sound mind should be sought from the professional prior to killing oneself. If only because one should methodically rule out the notion that one had been laboring under some compulsion at the time that it occurred.

“It doesn’t have to be an official statement of purpose,” Robert Lacombe said to her trying to clarify for her what he wanted. He wanted Karen to write something for him that specified that he was not in fact delusional at least to the point that he was incapable of taking responsibility for his own actions. Of course he had mental problems: neuroses, minor psychoses, and an overarching sense that he was not of this world. But that didn’t mean at least in a legal sense that he wasn’t of sound mind. He was looking for an affirmation in other words that he was crazy and capable of taking his own life at some point but not crazy enough to not realize what he was doing. Simple enough, even for her, who—correct Robert if he was wrong—wasn’t even the holder of either a PhD or medical license. Lacombe sought her advice simply because she was on the bus line on his way to work. He didn’t see Karen Kaminkoff as any effective medical professional or really even a very nice person.

Also it must be said he had no intention of killing himself either now or at some moment after so many criteria were met.

“As ever, I’m an investigator attempting to gather facts as I see them,” he said to her when the subject had ultimately been broached. Unusual to say the least. That one should undertake and research the rudiments of suicide but admit no real desire (well, at the moment) to

actually go through with it. But here we have Robert Lacombe in a nutshell. He had a profoundly methodical approach to life. He was utterly cordoned off from his own desires so he really couldn't say from moment to moment what his true motives were for any particular undertaking. For every incongruous action that occurred with him a rationalization was created for it. He tended to believe these excuses exclusively. He had no counter-argument for why he was doing what he was doing. He had no real sense that there was a secondary person dwelling inside him who was manning the emotional controls.

Now as far as the reason he had ever set to searching out the suicide website, this too required some explanation from him and was really something, as far as he was concerned, utterly run of the mill.

"The new tapes that I sent away for contained information that as expected changed my life upon repeated viewing," he told Karen Kaminkoff.

Once they had arrived via Sharif Johnson's rough touch exactly a week after their re-ordering, the first thing he had did upon opening the package was to call in sick for work and begin to play them constantly in more or less a constant loop, loading up both VCR's with one of the two tapes and rewinding one when the other was ongoing. It seemed he needed to be immersed in its material as opposed to merely having viewed it in some run of the mill manner. He needed to become part of it for the message to truly sink in, to obliterate his own self-identity in the act of absorbing the material. No passive student he when it came to issues that truly mattered. Every syllable needed to be committed to memory with him, every pause and gesture needed to be analyzed for further meaning. If he hadn't done it all at once he would have done it with extreme slowness and this would have been a cause for even greater consternation in him. The truths that supposedly lay just beyond his understanding would be calling out to him at odd hours. And the obsession would have been all the greater when he finally came to it and let it take over his life.

The tapes contained two lectures by Marshall Applewhite, the leader of something called the Heaven's

Gate Society. The ad's copy for the tapes in its entirety read thusly: *Time for a Change?*

Underneath the script was a comet in silhouette with something like flakes shooting off its tail likely into a surrounding abyss. And then there was the Los Angeles address printed where you could order the cassettes.

"There is a man in this world who has a great secret to share," Robert said to Karen using the same words Marshall Applewhite had used on Tape 1.

The secret being was that the world was ready for recycling. It would come to an end shortly. People needed to be ready, therefore, to depart. There was only way off the planet at least in a realistic scenario. More than anything, a person needed to be prepared to do whatever the evolved humans' avatar told you to do in order to ensure his or her own survival.

In the tapes, Marshall said that he realized all this fifteen years ago after surviving an auto accident that by rights should have taken his life.

"For weeks on end," Bo, who had stepped into Marshall's form, said in Tape 2, "I lay in bed and wondered why I was chosen over all men to deliver this message to humanity. The answer came in a revelation that had nothing to do with the Biblical God. My father is a father above human," Bo told them. "And therefore I am above human too. And I tell you the only way out is to move forward. There is no escape for you in the religions of old. There is nothing that you can gain from the Bible beyond stories that will lead to your own death if you should think that they are even remotely true."

As his biological father was as religious as a piece of furniture, Robert Lacombe had never been a reader of the Bible. But he had always felt an aversion to it as if it was some sort of willful propaganda written by bullies that could only lead to errors in judgment if its advice was heeded.

"I don't believe in many truths," he said to Karen and by this he meant simply that somebody had to be right about something. Which left so many people wrong about so many things. Maybe Marshall Applewhite was right about this particular subject he was expounding upon. If this was the case he must be followed unto and past the grave. Somehow he conflated the belief in Heaven's Gate

with the ability to commit suicide. No explicit instructions on this matter had been expounded upon in any of the tapes. But he couldn't stop thinking that at a certain point the assumption of a personal faith was identical to the taking of one's own life. He was always attaching only dark meanings to the act though he was at pains to describe exactly why. Because of past experience he didn't trust anybody to any real degree that he could speak about profoundly. He didn't see that any of them had ever been worthy of his trust.

But he always had believed himself to be an alien just underneath the surface and somebody for whom integration into society was impossible past a superficial point. He was different from other humans fundamentally. And there was no amount of therapy or coaching that would allow this difference to vanish, even if he so desired it. So it was ever since leaving high school he had always sought confirmation of this difference. He had a slight abnormality in his left ventricle for instance that he had always seized on as proof of his extraterrestrial origin. He had taken an IQ test once that had been printed in *Omni* which declared him a candidate for Mensa. This too he thought of as definitive proof of otherness. There was no joke so sublime that he could ever be roused to laugh at and there was no puzzle or brainteaser so trite that he wouldn't be able to linger over until it was solved.

The reality of Robert's alien nature was obvious to him. But the subject was so outlandish especially in a therapeutic setting as to be off-limits to exploration lest he be confined to a rubber walled room for the remainder of his days or until he recanted.

"If you think I'm crazy for what I truly believe," he said to Karen who admittedly had stopped listening so closely long ago, "then mental wellness becomes your enemy. There's no desire to be normal when it includes the need to live a lie. Or maybe I could just shut up about so many things and then you'll claim I'm cured. At which point you'd have to ask what was the point of going to therapy at all? Better to simply re-affirm your true nature and hunker down for society's reaction against you."

If he believed anything about therapy given his blasé treatment of it up until this point, Lacombe supposed he

saw it merely as an extension of the larger culture's coercive tendencies toward individual expression. At best a waste of time, he was genuinely annoyed that the suicide website had insisted it was a good idea. But now the fifty minutes was up and he had fulfilled at least part of the obligation. It was in fact exactly as he had expected. He didn't understand the stress that the website placed on seeking out therapy. He didn't understand really what benefit one was expected to derive from just talking to another human being.

Maybe a sense of satisfaction, dull satisfaction, from the enactment of due diligence as regarded a serious matter. Whiteoleander.com, whose webmaster was somewhere in Amsterdam, had hinted as much and stressed constantly that suicide was a logical recourse to various life situations that did not lend themselves to other, less drastic processes. So it would be in the future that he would come to know that Marshall Applewhite had endorsed this analysis wholeheartedly. Neither he nor Robert Lacombe was necessarily any sort of self-lacerating depressive but saw suicide as a means to an end. Beings both evolved and non-evolved needed to shed their identity in order to assume another. And death it must be admitted really wasn't the end of anything whether one believed in an afterlife or not. If one knew anything about the history of alien visitation unto this lonely planet one knew that all sort of possibilities regarding transcendence were possible. There was no necessity ever to believe in God in order to believe in heaven. One was never on surer ground when one recognized the fact that humanity was only a single run on the evolutionary ladder. Everything attributed to God had a rational basis in science. And nothing that existed on this planet could exist without extra-terrestrial interference.

On the way out Robert Lacombe asked Karen about her views on these matters, whether or not she believed a type of human evolution was possible or even desirable. If she believed it was possible who did she think would be chosen and who would be left behind?

"If it is, it's left for somebody else to decide," she said to him as a way of cutting off the conversation entirely. She sensed that he was trying to get her involved in a conversation that was un-therapeutic. She didn't want to

validate his obsessions by having a rational conversation about them. She didn't want to make it seem that he was actually making sense in absolutely any way.

When he finally shuffled out of her office, Karen Kaminkoff took out her notepad and began to scrawl notes about the session as per the APA standard, being careful to remove any reference to Robert himself in them lest she reveal his identity if they were stolen.

"I don't think he's really dangerous in any sense," she said to her boyfriend Cole when he had brushed by Lacombe when coming in. Admittedly it was a judgment call even for a trained professional but it didn't seem that he had a history of violence. And the only person at least in her presence he discussed seriously about killing was himself.

He seemed to harbor grudges against the world but then again that could be said for so many people both in and out of therapy. Regardless of what impulses he would act upon, however, he was definitely delusional. She thought he needed to be in therapy full time but she didn't advise him to do so. He was a pain in the ass as a patient. And for all her training she didn't have any desire to help him. He didn't seem to want to be in therapy so she assumed helping him would be a waste of time. Or maybe not. Maybe she was prejudicial in her judgment. Or maybe it was even far worse than she had imagined and he needed to be institutionalized immediately.

Not being a psychotherapist with an advanced degree from an accredited school, Karen didn't feel entitled to judge. She tended to defer such questions to more accredited professionals whose job entitled them to make that call.

"He told me he was just following orders coming here," she said to Cole about Robert's presence. At which point she peered into the tiny waiting room she shared with the oil and lube place next door to make sure he was gone. Karen didn't want any scenes like what happened last week with another patient when they had lingered outside unbeknownst to her and overhead her hotline call to LA General. Likely this patient wasn't especially dangerous. But she tended to doubt her own diagnostic abilities to make such a judgment. The only license she possessed

was in holistic healing which required little more than a two hundred dollar yearly donation to the State of California. She didn't think the more damaged ones she encountered were in fact doing themselves any good at all coming to her regularly. Past a point all the clichés of the practice that she had mastered fell on deaf ears. She didn't think she really had a right to administer therapy to them. But she accepted Medicaid payments and was on convenient bus lines. For them she thought this was enough.

Whatever Robert Lacombe would do likely he would do in the privacy of his North Hollywood domicile and at a remove from the social safety net that was in part constructed to save wretched souls like him from himself.

"I don't think he knows why he does the things that he does or believes what he believes," she told Cole and wondered if Robert had been aware of who she had been talking to throughout their session. He had seemed especially distant even for him and somebody for whom objective reality had lost its zesty allure long ago. Maybe there was a point where people were beyond counseling. They needed pharmacological intervention, to be doped up the rest of their lives to not be a burden and threat to society any longer. This would not be treatment or care but a management of a disease for the benefit of others solely. She thought likely if he didn't kill himself first Lacombe would enter the mental health system of Los Angeles and be categorized. She couldn't see him ever being cured. In his case he didn't know what that meant. He couldn't see him ever being normal or even close to it.

By the time she and Cole left her office Robert had been forgotten by Karen completely. Cole had found his haircut more disturbing than his behavior. Best described as a type of modified Moe Howard that had been left to grow in the back, this coiffing must have been self-administered.

"If I were him," Cole said to Karen while driving her back to their shared apartment on Fairfax Avenue on his Harley, "I'd just cut the whole thing off and go like Kojak. Go like the Marines. There's nothing to what he's trying to do," he said to her. "It's like he doesn't own a mirror or care how he looks."

Probably Robert owned a mirror but never used it for things as banal as the upkeep of his personal appearance. His physical interface, his body, was just a device to him, a necessary evil required of all as yet un-evolved creatures.

"If he actually took care of himself he would finally have to admit how crazy he was," Karen said to Cole, not sure what she meant by this exactly but sure she was right about it nevertheless. Robert was committed to his fantasy life, that was to say, and would never admit that the real world held any more degree of importance for him than one of the video games that his co-workers at the Orange County effects studio kept on playing on a stolen Nintendo system in the backroom at every spare moment. He didn't think he was really part of the fabric of the real world, anyway, or at least was committed to this belief. Thus, the strangeness once more for Karen of him seeking out psychological help in the first place.

Robert Lacombe's entire belief system was predicated on him not requiring psychological help. He was certain he was one of the few beings on the planet entirely devoid of illusion, entirely sane. He was certain he was the only person who seemed accurately aligned to humanity's circumstances and would require no sort modification of his behavior even slightly.

The reason that Karen felt that Robert was somebody for whom therapy would be of no use, therefore, was that he had not truly sought it out in the first place.

"He doesn't want to change because he assumes the world will," she said to Cole, once they were back in the one bedroom apartment they had shared for the past year off Fairfax Avenue ever since Cole's old roommate took off for Las Vegas. This residence was nothing approaching a nice place to live exactly and the cracks in the drywall testified to a certain lack of upkeep in the building. Of late, also they had grown sick of the noise level due to the complex's younger tenants. They were seeking out places to live daily in the classified ads in the *LA Times*. Nothing both convenient and nice that they could afford so they were gradually focusing on that which was inconvenient and nice. They were looking at places in Encino and Manhattan Beach tomorrow. It was a nearly two hour trek from one place to the other and they had already resigned

themselves to the trip. Just the way it was out here. They didn't think they would ever get a break and find something in their price range nearby.

Robert Lacombe's interest in the philosophy of Marshall Applewhite had flown right over Karen's head. She had assumed wrongly that this Marshall was the person behind the website on suicide that Lacombe kept referring to throughout the session.

"I don't get all the talk about needing to evolve and killing yourself at the same time," she said to Cole once emerging from the bathroom after taking a shower. Of late Karen had gotten into the habit of taking a purgative shower after work as a substitute for a stiff drink. She felt the need to stay under the water for as long as the hot water held out. Every so often she would get right back under the shower several hours later. She couldn't pin down why she was doing this even when the behavior was pointed out to her by Cole. Just something she felt the need to do somehow. She didn't feel there was any rhyme or reason to it. Maybe there was some sort of soot in her office duct work that she was reacting to unconsciously.

This evening she had stayed under there so long her skin was still pink from the exposure to the water when she changed out of her bathrobe into her sweatpants. Despite her claims to the contrary, something about Lacombe had stayed with her past the drive home. As the evening progressed bits and fragments of the session had returned to her constantly. There were so many incongruities in his claims for what the future would hold that at the time she simply had blanked them all out. But removed from his presence suddenly there was room for a re-examination. She didn't know what exactly his intentions were for himself. He seemed to have a clear plan that was beyond articulating. He didn't seem to have an apt way of putting into words what seemed a wholly subjective experience in which life could be engendered from death and quite possibly the other way around at once.

Halfway through dinner she decided that if Robert had made another appointment with her she would not let him in the office.

"I'm in over my head with him," Karen told Cole after she had finished drying her hair. Somehow she couldn't

stop talking about Lacombe despite her intentions to do so. He had seemed to have left a bigger impression on her than she had thought originally or even desired. There was some sort of delayed effect with him in which the memory of his presence tended to grate on your nerves more than his presence itself. There was a subtext to him, a type of psychic undertow that was profoundly disturbing. His weirdness superficially seemed utterly commonplace. But all his little tics and utterances accrued in the memory over time. There was nothing about him that was really straightforward. Indeed he did seem finally like a kind of alien and not of the friendly *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* variety. There was a restlessness to his strangeness as if it had been foisted upon him all at once. And it was impossible to know what he would do to do somebody from one minute to the next.

Maybe if he insisted on seeing her (which she rather doubted would happen) she would refer him to somebody in the hospital she was affiliated with downtown. Karen had been warned repeatedly not to simply dump her troubled clients on an already overtaxed mental health system. But in this case she was stumped. The other alternative would simply be to close up shop altogether for a while and wait him out. With somebody like Robert, however, this could take decades. He was so methodical and blessed with a type of monomania that by definition refused to abate. He was somebody for whom significant amounts of time didn't affect behavior at all.

Probably her best recourse in such an occurrence would be to tell him the truth and admit to him that she in her limited practice had no context for dealing with somebody like him. Or maybe just knuckle under and wait the fifty minutes out. He had mentioned he was only looking for three sessions at the most. Maybe she could get him to commit to that. She'd have him pre-pay so that a type of natural breakpoint had been reached after the third session.

It wasn't that she felt threatened in Robert's presence in any way. But in addition to her office rent being raised and their upcoming move being on the horizon, there was too much stress for her at the moment to deal with such matters in a straightforward way.

“There are some rules that are not meant to be broken,” Karen Kaminkoff said to Cole casting her eyes out the open living room window that overlooked the apartment pool. There was a 9 pm cut off for pool usage on weekdays that was largely ignored by most of the building’s tenants and really whoever else happened by wanted to take a swim. Five people were in there presently as best that she could see, more or less swirling around each other and apparently engaged in a game where they tried to latch onto the other person’s ankles. Their noise level didn’t create such a distraction for Karen so much as their presence in the pool originally. The pool hours were posted just behind the diving board. And every rule was underlined and ended with an exclamation point.

Black and white, men and women, it was hard to see exactly who the swimmers were from Cole’s apartment owing to their constant motion more or less that made them into diaphanous shapes from this angle more so than human forms. And also that their living room window was in need of some cleaning from both sides of the pane.

“Lookit over there,” Karen said to Cole and pointed at what might have been a highly polished pistol shimmering underneath the pool’s blue-white light just astride a lounge chair. Maybe if they didn’t vacate within another half-hour Cole should call the landlord to complain or better yet the cops and have them chased out of there. Scenes like this had been going on nearly every night around here almost until three in the morning. It couldn’t be ignored by either of them easily. It couldn’t have been blotted out of memory simply by closing the window and the drapes and turning up the air conditioning to maximum to obscure the whooping and profanity from below.

Distracted from the demands of his day which included an all-day trek out to Ojai, Cole Stewart seemed to mind the pool party less than Karen.

“Maybe we should film what’s going on out there,” he said to Karen before recalling that he had left his Panaflex Zoom TV camera back in the news van he had driven up to Ojai where, it must be admitted, it belonged. Well, maybe he could drive his bike all the way back to the news station but likely by then the kids or whoever it was out there would be long gone. The tenants of this building generally

drank too much, they got high too much to be able to swim for very long. Or maybe they would swim and get tired and go home. But of course Karen was right that they shouldn't be so willful in their actions. Or maybe as they both suspected the swimmers were simply trespassing and probably should be arrested and dragged off to jail at once.

For the time being, however, he would try and distract Karen enough so that whatever was happening down there wouldn't ruin their evening completely. Maybe they'd get lucky and whoever it was would depart the premises before midnight and wouldn't whip out a boom box as happened the week before and the windows would have to be shut on an otherwise lovely evening. They could watch TV for a while and then turn the air conditioning on as they got ready for bed. Eventually everything would be forgotten if whoever it was kept it down. Eventually she'd forget about the world outside and then there would be nothing for Cole to worry about at least for another few days until the pool party began afresh down there and thoughts of going to the police or moving had started anew.

On the TV the local news KABC for which he was a senior cameraman was still on before seguing to the national report and he was interested to watch how his footage of this morning was cut.

"You could see how far it's slipped in just two weeks," he said to Karen referring to the placement of the Rusty Mother Mary story on the local report. Nowadays people lost interest in things more quickly than any new item of interest could be generated. Probably in two days he would have made his last trip out to Ojai and, short of resurgence in interest, the story would be allowed to die. They had set up a shrine for the rust stain and there were investigators or whatever the hell you wanted to call them moving in from the archdiocese. The station had milked it for all it was worth from a news angle and now they were letting it peter out. The story had exhausted itself and they were attempting to transition away from it completely. Likely when it came on tonight it would be in the form of a ten second item done in voice over by the anchor. There was no more angles in it to be exploited. But the story's absurd strangeness had attracted national attention as of last week so they at least felt the need to pay homage to it.

Like everybody else they were waiting on the decision of the archdiocese to issue a particular judgment about it. A Monseigneur or investigator or whatever he was had already come to north to make an inspection. They had hidden his efforts from the LA news crews with a series of red velvet drapes and a cordon. As he worked, church workers in blue windbreakers started blaring liturgical music on two boom boxes as if whatever the inspector was doing in there made a ton of noise and they wanted to cover that up too as it might be a tip off to his methods.

"I think there was water involved in all the tests he ran," Cole mentioned to Karen who was staring past him through their own closed drapes to the pool beyond. To her the sooner they moved the better but Cole knew better as one goddamned place was the same as the next as regarded other people fucking with you, getting loud with you, invading your privacy and generally ignoring a given complex's stated rules. Unlike Karen, Cole had been living in dumps like this the entirety of his adult life and knew this to be the case. You moved from one place to the next and all the mayhem and the rude behavior and the screaming matches with neighbors simply followed you across town or across the country or wherever you might go. But Karen didn't seem to know this yet. She saw the problem as easily resolved. Which was why she was obsessed with it and eager to have it end. For him such annoyances were existential. Short of moving on top of a remote mountain Cole knew you were never going to have true peace and quiet. And probably the more you invented potential routes of escape for yourself the greater the sense of anxiety and disappointment became when they were cut off for you.

Probably all that the Monseigneur was doing on the other side of the posh drapery was either reading a book or praying for guidance. They didn't want the cameras catching what could be attributed as ineffectualness on the part of the church representative. After the inspection or whatever it was, he told the news crews he was going to make his decision later and left them all hanging in suspense. If they declared it a miracle likely the crowd would have quadrupled in size overnight. And maybe this too factored into their calculus. They didn't want others accusing them of rousing people unnecessarily. Probably

they would delay their verdict until the hub-bub died down on its own. They didn't want to be sued by the convenience store owner maybe if there was some destruction to his property as a result of church action.

"I never could see the face of Mary or whoever it was supposed to be there at all," Cole said to Karen though he had to admit he was looking very hard for it especially. The little patch of oxidation that somebody believed to be a holy vision merely looked to Cole like a bit of beefsteak tomato that had been trampled underfoot. Cole didn't anthropomorphize the shape at all and was having difficulty anthropomorphizing any witness who had. Unlike Martina Hernandez, the reporter to whom Cole was assigned. To Cole she was the soul of empathy when she interviewed these people and towards the end of their vigil up there he felt actually humbled to be working with her. She was either a believer like the rest of them or a consummate pro. But as of yesterday even Martina had to admit that the story had lost its legs. Short of a thumbs up by the Monseigneur nobody would expect that they would be back there for another day. Nobody assumed that the story simply wouldn't be allowed to die under the weight of its own inanity.

A pocket-size plywood cross that one of the worshippers had made and given to the crew was still in Cole's pocket, gathering lint over the course of days prior to it going straight into the garbage.

"To them it's as real as you and me," Cole said to Karen recalling the sense of awed reverence they held towards the rust stain. Somebody had constructed a shrine that framed the stain prior to them arriving on scene and made the likelihood of its supernatural origins slightly more plausible to an impartial viewer. Well, look: he didn't see religion as good or bad personally. But he couldn't help thinking that too much was being made about this apparition especially by the people most desperate to have it be so. As far as Cole could see, so many of these worshippers were all working class people, mostly Latino, and many were elderly waiting for something miraculous to occur. But their church never dissuaded them in any way and alms were being collected from the worshippers as the vigil dragged on. Towards the end of the long evenings

some of the worshippers seemed to be tiring from their stay in the lot. It was cold up there in the desert and nobody, least of all the church, was working overtime to ease their discomfort. The person who had made the plywood crosses for the news crew seemed to be an arthritis sufferer and handed them over with extreme difficulty. Short of Christ's return, in other words, Cole didn't think any good could come from this. Eventually it would all pass and be forgotten. And he thought the emotions and expressed desires of the worshippers would have evaporated completely into nothingness like earth's atmosphere being siphoned off into space. Nobody, not even the Holy Virgin, gave a fuck about them apparently. Not even the ever-famous lord of compassion would drop what he was doing for even a few seconds and help to ease their burden even slightly.

The news crew of which Cole was a member had done their best with them, donating blankets to the assembled on the second day and calling around to the local food pantries to see if a food line could be set up on the third day. Many of them likely would have refused the food if offered, however. They wanted to be free of the dictates of the body. They didn't want to abide, but transcend.

If the Good Lord wanted to take them, He should be allowed to take them. They assumed the mortification of the flesh brought on by lack of food was one of the dictates of their faith.

"The Seven-Eleven owner is milking it for all it's worth," Cole told Karen deep in their TV's pastel glow recalling the religious candleholders and listed the religious items that mysterious had appeared in his store the day after the discovery of the Holy Mother. You could say he was simply being a good capitalist but he didn't seem somebody in possession of a real solid grasp of economic theory. The store was falling apart, otherwise. This was the event that might have saved it for the time being. Which was a coincidence too fortuitous to be coincidental.

Probably it was the owner who had "discovered" the image in the dumpster one day and started showing it off to whoever might care to see.

"There a special level of hell for guys like him," Cole said to Karen then muted the TV when the national news

started. Too much depressing items on it presently, especially one of the first filmed reports of what had gradually come to be called the genocide in Rwanda, a country that few Americans had even knew existed prior to this event, let alone cared about. So it was a pile of disembodied black limbs was shown on the report gathered in a concrete square just visible through a yellow haze caused by burning tires. It was shocking that they showed something like this even as it was a monthly sweeps period. Even if there had been a verbal warning by the anchor accompanying the footage it seemed outrageous that such imagery was shown.

It didn't seem there was any reason at all as to why they chose to air such graphic imagery. Furthermore, the news anchor had yet to explain what was behind the violence. Probably this was because they didn't know themselves what the causes were. They were scrambling with their world book encyclopedias trying to find information on the country. There were Hutus in the country and Tutsis in the country and supposedly the Hutus were attempting to exterminate the Tutsis. But they didn't say why this was so. Because of such informational gaps the coverage of Rwanda was becoming a holocaust in the abstract, devoid of any real historical (and therefore moral) context. In the hands of the evening news Rwanda became a parade of tiny figures viewed from a mountaintop. Interesting for its sociology but that was it. And the implicit message to the viewer at home was that neither of the parties were really representative of the human race in general. The atrocity lacked an explanation because there was no reason to provide any. Just like groups of ants engaged in a territorial war. It was a matter for the biology department alone.

Realize, it wasn't America's fight hardly even though at least around this area of Los Angeles there seemed plenty of African businesses full of people that looked exactly like the corpses on TV.

"I think," Karen said to Cole and picked up the pillow on the couch, "the world's coming to an end. I think this is the start of it and it's going to get worse and worse from here on in until it's too much to take. Everybody dies in the end. I think we're just waiting for the end to come."

Cole thought the Hutus had started it all. Or maybe he had that backwards. Maybe the UN should get together and send a peacekeeping force to the region or something if only to set minds at ease.

“Something needs to be done about it,” he said either to Karen or the memory of the KNBC TV anchor whose name he had momentarily forgotten. The next news story came on which concerned some sort of impropriety by senior officials in the Clinton administration. At this point there seemed nothing significant to talk about. They couldn’t simply stop the news for lack of interest on all parties concerned. So there was all this filler concerning Washington inside baseball and human interest stories about grandmothers in their eighties going back to college to earn their degree.

Watching the mood of his girlfriend darken by degrees, Cole Stewart decided this was a good time to go outside for a smoke.

“If you’re down there,” she said to him assuming he would be out by the pool, “go chase whoever it is away. Tell them you’re the landlord. Go tell them you’ve called the cops and they’ll be here any minute.”

Owing to the slightly dangerous makeup of the neighborhood this was a serious bit of bad advice that Karen had given Cole and he immediately made up his mind to ignore it.

“I’ll do what I think is best,” he said to her merely and checked in his shirt pocket for the Marlboro Lights that he favored nowadays. In reality, he had decided to avoid the pool area altogether and go smoke near the trash dumpsters on the other side of the building. If they were indeed trespassers down there even silently watching them would have been an unwise provocation. People who generally didn’t give a fuck about personal property rights were also notoriously aggressive when cornered.

After this day out in Ojai with its attendant three hour commute, Cole could do without any sort of confrontation. He would rather take a peek and pretend he was ignoring them on the way down to the garbage. He would at worst simply stare from the balcony for a few seconds before moving quickly without making eye contact with anybody.

Not hearing anything especially enticing down below he was halfway across the balcony when he finally squirrelled up the courage to take a look for himself what was happening. Nobody was in the pool any longer but the gate that was supposed to have remained shut at all times was wide open and flopping back and forth on its rusty hinge as abetted by a recent infiltration of Santa Ana wind into the complex's confines.

French as rendered with a certain guttural tongue by two low voices was emanate from an angular shadow cast by the complex's pool shed within which a red cigarette tip was visible with every inhalation.

"*Nous ne sommes pas contre quiconque conspirons*," Cole heard one of them say over the hum of the pool filter engine right next to the shed. "*Nous ne sommes pas les monstres que vous nous faites dehors pour être*."

Bare chested, coal-skinned, stripped to the waist or maybe even completely naked and, to judge by their barely visible yet horribly emaciated frames, they seemed as utterly out of place next to a Southern California pool as surfer boy Cole Stewart might have been on the edge of Lake Victoria fighting off locust clouds. There was no context that Cole could find for either what was being said or why. They didn't seem certainly like mere trespassers out for an evening dip. Their presence seemed to possess some sort of purpose beyond an evening's entertainment. Or at least that's the way it seemed to Cole. They weren't lingering but standing still and observing. They were waiting apparently for something relevant to occur at least in their eyes.

Huddling in a corner as they were they didn't seem a threat to anybody hardly which moved Cole to walk past them even more quickly than he had originally planned once he had stopped looking down. No sense in picking a fight with innocent men. He didn't see why they simply couldn't have been left alone to their own devices.

"*Nous sommes des diables et serons toujours*," he heard one of the stick men say to the other on the way downstairs. Not speaking French or the pidgin they were using only the word *diables* stuck with Cole. Hard to know exactly what they were referring to of course but the choice of words seemed odd. They didn't seem intent on talking

about the things ordinary lowlifes would have. They seemed more dignified and composed than that altogether. They seemed waiting for some sort of judgment to take and that would be that with them for a lifetime.

Near the dumpster, evidence of trespassers was everywhere but only indirectly in the slogans that they left behind them.

"*Choose Life*," one graffito advised right near the lid's hinges but didn't say how or why. In other words, it seemed to be of limited help to those genuinely wishing to broaden their spiritual horizons. Many people like Cole would have liked to have had the blanks filled in for them. They needed things explained for them to the nth degree. They needed to have a scheme on paper that they would be able to follow to the letter.

To him such sentiments seemed too obvious to have passed without some minor bit of elaboration on the part of the authors. But nothing of the sort existed. He looked around on all sides of the dumpster. At least on this subject there wasn't a single other word written.

A man with a beard drawn in caricature on the far edge right near a misplaced wheel being the only item that seemed to have been rendered by the same person to judge by the color of the spray paint used.

"*Time for a change?*" its caption advised, this time in precipitously small lettering that made one wonder how it was rendered exactly. So it seemed one or the other of these slogans had to be a put on. Choose Life, but it was also true in some ineffable way that it was time for a change. Cole thought whoever had written such missives by-and-large didn't know what they were talking about. And he couldn't say offhand which path he meant to follow more. He was all alone out here with his cigarette. He didn't know what was being attempted to be communicated to him just at the time by the writer.

# Chapter Three → (June, 1996)

**N**ever a man to dwell too long on what-ifs --those merely possible tendrils of life that hung back beyond the present moment's moorings like braids of dead hair on an Incan mummy—Max Schein, a physical wreck, a spiritual archeologist in the midst of the ruins of his soul, nevertheless could recall the exact instant when life turned bad for him.

"We were there in a circle just after dynamic meditation," Max told local tough guy and taciturn presence Lucky Murchison, referring to an esoteric practice whose very recollection seemed inappropriate given the ramshackle surroundings. They were huddled in one corner of a watering hole on Sunset Boulevard known more for its famous clientele than its inviting or even hygienic presence in the present day. "Just sitting in a circle in the grass in 1978 with our sandals off," he said. "In Pune, in a public park," he said to Lucky. "Or what they called a public park in Pune at the time, which was basically a vacant lot that they refused to cultivate. Every now and again they would take a mower to it and that would be that for several months," he said to Lucky. "The park maintenance. But there we were gathered in a little circle in the park," he said, "and none of us were wearing shoes by the way or even owned a pair of shoes because we wanted the Indian experience whole hog, the shit-filled bucket after shit-filled bucket experience of India, the poverty and the atrocious fashion sense experience of the place, the disease and the deprivation of it, and so forth. Because it was supposed to be the key to our spiritual evolvement in some uncertain

way that none of us understood, a means of leaving material need behind by having our physical circumstances be so wretched that we wouldn't be attached to it any longer and could leave it behind like so many empty husks off overripe corn."

A lot of Buddhist orange being worn needless to say in those days by all parties concerned, Max went onto say. And those sheepish smiles of the putatively enlightened that never could shake the feeling that they were victims of an elaborate con.

The little beggar that came up to Schein one day just off a half-paved road on the park's western flank was also a quite familiar type in these degraded surroundings, a faux ascetic so it seemed. But one devoid utterly of religious fervor, dressed in a white tunic made gray/black in most places by the accreted filth on it and exposing a Tex Avery xylophone of protruding ribs that looked for all the world like they might break through the skin at each bone's apex.

"I know your name," the beggar said to Schein in Bengali which was a surprise given the official language of the Rajasthan-situated Pune was Hindi. He wasn't trying to impress anyone hardly, merely be minimally communicative with a foreigner. So foreign to the flower of the American upper middle class was he that he was taken as a mystical vision. He wasn't trying to be something he was not, however. He didn't have that sort of ambition in him.

Having been in India three years by this time, the only words in "Indian" Max Schein spoke regardless were those that facilitated a way to the lavatory, a train station, or the open tin shacks that passed for brothels in this tropical town in the endless slums north of the financial center where the English word "blowjob" had attained universal status, right next to the American "O.K."

"I assumed," Max told Lucky, "he was begging for change. So I gave him a fifty rupee note and a pat on the head. Probably not my smartest move considering what came next," he said to him. "But if any person can divine with absolutely clarity what would be happening to them only one minute later we'd all be far better off than we are, " he said.. "You gotta live life to see what's in it, I've always found. All my guesses about it are always wrong. I've

never been capable of a philosophical distance. I've never been able to look at life abstractly and theorize correctly about what's about to happen."

The little man, it soon became obvious, did not want any money from Max and his friends and this was made clear by the disgusted look that came across his face when the pink note was shoved into his hand by Max after it was not accepted when held up an inch from his nose.

"He wasn't a beggar, a *bhikṣuka* as they call them over there," Max said to Lucky and swirled his Bloody Mary around with his pinky finger. The copper ring that was dangling from it north of the second knuckle was on the verge of dropping to the glass's bottom. So he had to keep the knuckle crooked at all times. Weird that he didn't think of taking the goddamn thing off before he dipped in there. Or weird that he even dipped at all. It couldn't have lent much to the drink's taste certainly, that dirty metal thing dangling from the dirty digit. At least at this time when his hands had roamed into unspeakable places and for unspeakable reasons it couldn't have been a mere hygienic oversight on his part as much as self-punishment. He was appalled at the memory of his behavior and taking it out on himself. As if he was complete stranger to himself and this was the first he was hearing of it.

Indeed on second glance the man turned out to be no kind of beggar at all. His tunic was merely a ripped white work shirt flowing over corduroy pants the same color as his skin.

"He saw that we were Americans despite our best attempts not to be seen as such," Max said to Lucky Murchison and pressed the damp ring to his lips. He wanted to kiss his own ring and was looking for a socially acceptable reason to do so in a public place. That was the reason for the dipping all along.

What the man, who was in fact not a *bhikṣuka* but a brick mason living in one of the tenements adjacent to the park, wanted was for Max and his friends to seek treatment for his son who lay at home nearby. Seeing that they were Americans he assumed Max and his fellow suppliants had superior access to medical care in this ramshackle country. He was looking for a bit of mercy to be on display from one human being to another. He didn't know how to ask for it

properly thus the use of Bengali. Hindi he spoke too little of to communicate with it effectively. He assumed one of Max's compatriots would eventually get the message and translate it for him. Somehow they looked slightly more nativized than Max. Which was why he assumed Max as the leader.

"At the time, man," Max Schein said, "at the exact moment that it was happening, I didn't know what to say. Osho, our guru (and the guru of the world) preached about all manner of love thy neighbor and so forth. But then again he always said happiness was the key to life. We didn't want, none of us, to be burdened with any sort of responsibility in any way to another human being. People who are into that trip generally head off to the American suburbs rather than an ashram in India. It's sad, but true. But back then you should know we thought of ourselves as the most moral people on earth. The negative comparison with us to some suburban stay at home mom we all have found ridiculous. We were each in our way in our minds perfected visions of our former selves. People around that ashram would run around calling themselves "swami," all day long which means master or lord or something of that ilk. But then there would be the discrepancies to explain away like why half of all these supposedly enlightened beings had the clap and were concerned about it and the other half had the clap but were too stoned most of the time to be concerned about it, or didn't even know that had it at all."

Never a man to dwell excessively on what-ifs but, looking back on it, the point that it had all turned sour for him was when he had decided to go to India at all.

"The enlightened being, Osho," he said to Lucky, "who you should know was alternately Chandra Mohan Jain, Acharya Rajneesh, Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, Swami Prem Chinmaya, and Marc Harris Silverstein, (this was when the Feds finally got the goods on him and he needed a temporary fake identity to hide in) was somebody at the time that I esteemed over all other beings in the universe including myself, the God of the Hebrews, and my parents," he said. "Looking back on it now I can't reconcile my slavish devotion to him and the freethinking person I always thought of myself as in any way. Can't seem to get

a grip on how I was suckered by him so completely. But there it is. It's in the historical record. The proof of my involvement is in my unassailable memory which is just as good as history. I can't simply tune out and pretend the memory of him didn't exist. He is there in it like I am there in it. I can't claim none of it ever happened because that would be saying that I didn't exist in a way as well."

The thoughts of the Bhagwan ran something to the effect that charity of this type was fine as long as it didn't put you out in any way.

"He was always feeding our own wretched moral excesses back to us and masking it as a commitment to a spiritual path," Max said to Lucky whom, truth must be told, had stopped listening a long while back. The booze was free at the moment and Lucky didn't want to disrupt a good thing by actually paying attention and having to react in a heartfelt way. He had no concerns at all, truth be told, about Max's travails. It was all self-absorbed bullshit past a point surely. Real men didn't talk about themselves so much at all. Certainly not so much in this way at all where the talker seemed constantly on the verge of tears.

According to Max Schein, the Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh was some kind of incarnate devil who delighted in leading otherwise moral men down a path in which all temptation was seen as righteous virtue and was to be embraced wholeheartedly and accompanied with a fanatic's taste for the sort of bullying palaver that was designed to short circuit disturbing questions from all quarters before they were formed.

"Back then," Max said, "if the Bhagwan told us to go and cut our right arms off we'd have cut are right arms off. In a motherfucking second we'd have found ourselves a knife. We didn't have minds of our own while in his presence and only he actually saw that this was so. But I always remembered being so smug when I was there, that we knew a secret about the world that even great clerics knew nothing about let alone could experience firsthand. We were all played for fools exactly. Looking back, I don't think Osho had a holy bone in his body. He was all about the con, the separating of people from both their dignity and finances at once. But it took at least ten years of separation before I knew this was the case. I needed to

examine my motives one by one until various patterns became clear. At which point of course it was too late really to do anything about it. The damage had been done. And there was nobody still alive that I could actually apologize to with any sincerity about my actions."

The Indian man's hovel, it turned out, was exactly across the street from the park which was where he had spotted the Americans lounging.

"It was all one room," Max recalled for Lucky Murchison, omitting the part about the stench therein and the strange markings just on the other side of the entrance that seemed to point to a superstitious practice initiated by a religious adept whose creed Max was unaware. Despite Max's dalliance with eastern religion and the lip service he paid to multi-cultural practice, it should be mentioned that for the most part Hinduism with its impenetrable rituals left him cold. So much ceremony deprived of meaning Osho had called it. And so Max had come to believe that this was the case exactly. Back then also he was in the mood to tell rank strangers exactly what he thought of them. It was an effect of his "enlightenment," the ability to be rude to others on a dime. The shuffling off of all manners, which were mere middle class idiosyncrasies, mere spiritual drag weights fastened in place by the ruling class to hold the masses in check, was part of the process of becoming a swami. Eventually one could be nearly as evolved as Osho. But at that point one would have given up on all human feeling utterly.

As recalled by Max Schein, they had lit the place with clay pots filled with either peet or dung to use as candles. The slats in the roof let out the curdling smoke that these nearly prehistoric lamps created. Probably there was a tarp somewhere on the premises that they would use as a temporary roof when the rains came. No need for a roof in the dry season obviously and indeed it only would have served to increase the temperature in the place even more. They were smart doing it this way. Likely in the morning and afternoon there was plenty of light and a breeze to carry the stench of the place away for hours at a time.

The man's son who they had come to see was just around one corner of the hut, physically quarantined by what looked to be somebody's moldy shower curtain that

had been thrown out and made its way into the rumored (but still unseen by Max) dump on the town's outskirts where business was conducted twenty-four/seven and would be until the end of time.

"Rheumatic fever was my guess to take a look at all the shakes and the red skin but look I'm no Jonas Salk over here," Max told Lucky concerning the child's affliction. To Max it looked like whole sections of the boy's skin was in the process of falling off like a panels of wallpaper where the glue underneath has become decayed. The thermometer that somehow this family had gained access to read a hundred six when the father showed it to Max as if further evidence of the child's ailment was required. There were rectangular black patches visible on his body that Max had assumed as necrosis of various dying internal organs. And there was the sweet stink of him which above everything else signaled to Max Schein that he was near death and maybe even beyond hope of sophisticated western medicine.

Now, the western hospital that was supposed to have modern medical equipment was one big city over in Bombay a hundred miles to the northwest.

"The father wanted us to drive him there ourselves," Max said to Lucky taking note of his lack of groveling as he gave the instructions. He expected it to happen, in other words, as if his request was entirely reasonable. The father didn't know with whom he was dealing apparently. He didn't know all about Chandra Mohan Jain and his theories and prejudices that were now Max and his friends' prejudices absolutely. He was not necessarily alarmed nor put off by what he saw, by the state of the child in particular, but that's because he didn't give the incident much thought even as it was taking place. According to Max Schein, it soon became clear to all the Buddhist-orange Americans that the tattered man was offering up his sick child for adoption, or servitude or whatever you want to call it in exchange for saving his life. Here was the type of scene unique to the Third World of which ought to have left an emotional scar on most outsiders who were not prepared for it. Normal people reacted that way to scenes of extreme pathos in real life. Max and his friends, however, thought it was merely obnoxious. They thought

the father was being presumptuous with them to an extreme. They didn't see the desperateness behind the act. Or rather they saw it but refused to recognize it. They didn't see that this was a type of child sacrifice rendered unto extremely minor gods who were too callous to know what an act of charity entailed let alone execute it effectively.

According to Max Schein it was being presented as a gift in exchange for services rendered.

"Well, who the fuck does that in this day and age even in India," Max said and took a gulp from the Mason jar in which his Bloody Mary was contained. This bar was long since stripped of the glamor of the past had required such gimmickry to keep a clientele. Here in this place they offered Bloody Mary's as a hangover cure and dropped in a raw egg that sank to the bottom of the jar after it had been introduced largely unmixed. Once he drained the glass Schein didn't know if he was supposed to eat the egg whole but he did it anyway a la Rocky Balboa in one gulp. The slimy thing seemed to stick in the top of his throat and slide down into his stomach reluctantly as if conscious of the fate that awaited it down below. And even once the egg was swallowed for the longest time afterward he was conscious of its presence slightly like a ghostly pattern on an old-fashioned TV once it has been unplugged. The egg didn't seem to have curative powers regarding the hangover whatsoever. It was merely disgusting rather, maybe a cruel joke committed by the bartender at the expense of his hapless and nauseated clientele. The egg was after all simply an egg, pre-alive, waiting to be turned into something else more useful altogether than the slimy mess that it was.

Realize, giving a dying child to some latter-day hippies with trust funds to burn through didn't seem then as now a very bright idea to Max regardless of the desperate circumstances.

"He should have known we were all rotten to the core completely just based on our reactions when we got to his place," Max told Lucky with the grave seriousness of a man on his deathbed sharing a horrible secret to an executor for the first and last time. "We were busy making faces and gagging at everything we saw. We were programmed by

our master to be free spirits, you see. To us this meant behaving without restraint. This meant behaving not in the way we were expected to behave but in the way our feelings directed us. But feelings really are wretched, animal-like objects. I would not have wanted to have heard it then but now I know it is true. These are impulses produced by the body that follow the dictates of the body. They're the farts of the spirit, really, by-byproducts of more elevated hidden processes and probably are banished utterly from truly enlightened souls, if there is such a thing, if all spiritual search isn't so much of a con perpetrated by the strong to the detriment of the weak."

Well, if you were expecting either a happy ending or satisfying conclusion to this apparently true and appalling story you simply weren't paying attention to the clues that Max Schein had laid out like poisonous breadcrumbs along the route into the forest.

"If you want to know what actually happened, the facts behind the truth," he said to Lucky Murchison, "go ask somebody else. Go look it up in the hall of records if such a registry exists for Pune at that time which I'm wagering that it doesn't," he said. "Because they never mattered and were not being accounted for when they were alive. Why should it matter? And why should they be accounted for when they die? But really, I think that we did the best we could with him at the time. We took him to the train station wrapped in some sort of blanket. We stuck him on a train, bought him a one way ticket to Bombay and taped a note in English on the blanket's outside explaining all about him and his disease. That was it. We were already high at the time and had no intention of going all the way to another city and lying for the benefit of a complete stranger. In the condition he was in he likely didn't survive the trip. And we never heard another word about him from either the authorities of that place or from the father who knew where we lived obviously and could be assumed at some point to try and collect his pound of flesh from our collective but emaciated carcasses when the time came to do so."

"You killed his son," Lucky said to him wistfully as if this sort of thing was a slight violation of the social graces that

needed to be explained to the violator because it had escaped Max's attention in the first place.

"I think he was disappointed at us, not angry at us," Max said and sought the bartender's eyes. He had no intention of getting drunk an hour before but the story's retelling had gnawed at his willfulness mightily. "Being where he was in life and location, I think the awfulness of existence had been internalized by him to such an extent that he had expected this to happen. Merely he was playing a hunch, a million to one chance with us. We let him down but that's no reason at least in that diffident Hindu culture to get in anybody's face and explode."

Really years had passed since he had even thought about it and it hadn't been until Osho's death four years ago when it had hit home with Max about the evil act that they had perpetuated.

"When you're in his presence…" Max started to say of his former guru, then thought better of finishing the sentence. He knew it was a bad sentence to begin with. It didn't deserve to be finished. Because Osho's "presence" he now knew had nothing to do with it. In fact it could have been any one of the hundreds of god-men in India at the time trolling American college campuses and burgeoning New Age networks for new recruits. Osho was probably smarter than the average pajama wearing huckster operating in the sub-continent during the 1970's but also he was more narcissistic and evil than they were. He thrived because of his narcissism definitely and likely also because of his evil impulses which tended towards immediate self-gratification and the looting of his disciples' bank accounts. It was such willfulness that reinforced the notion that he was above moral accounting and therefore divinely inspired. If Osho was an ordinary thief he would have stolen likely with a sort of stealth that was missing from him. With Osho the thievery was out in the open. And this obviousness was a type of genius if you considered it. It was hard to say how calculated he was at his attempts at self-enrichment or whether he simply believed his own bullshit. Likely the Bhagwan was not a man capable of any sort of self-effacement. He heard himself declare himself to be God constantly and eventually he started in believing that this was the case. Of course God Almighty by

definition was devoid of boundaries, moral or otherwise. It wasn't stealing if it was all his property in the first place. And probably Osho felt this was something quite true deep down in himself.

He was God to his followers. And frequently said he was God. But then again Osho also told them frequently that God didn't exist and thank god He didn't exist or something to that effect. This was what was known in logical discourse as a *contradiction*. But if any of those hearing him at the moment seemed to find the thought bothersome it was left unarticulated for all time. They didn't have the ability to question him internally let alone publically. Physically they couldn't form the thoughts or speak the words that were intended to question his motives. They were all locked down not only brain washed, but brain cleansed and entirely open to any suggestion he had for them. This was a sorry state of affairs for most of them even though they all didn't know it yet. They had all given themselves up for good. Or at least until he released them from bondage. They had no self-esteem left or maybe none to begin with and they couldn't simply manufacture a bit on their own while under his sway. Decades later they would all look back and wonder what had come over them. With the exception of Max Schein they didn't see themselves as especially evil because of their actions. They were foolish they felt but not lacking in some crucial moral component. They saw themselves as basically good people that had been simply sucked in.

"It was a cult basically," he said. "Or maybe not so basically," Max Schein told Lucky and for the first time since entering into this den of iniquity turned his attention to matters that would occur in his life later. There was another day of shooting on the horror movie he had written entitled *Where the Sidewalk Ends*. In fact he was supposed to be there at the present moment observing the proceedings. He was just the series' writer-producer so he wouldn't be missed at least temporarily. The actors and creative types didn't like him buzzing around the set anyway making suggestions. They didn't think he had much to add to the movie after the teleplay was approved and they were probably right.

Probably what he meant by “or maybe not so basically” was that, unlike a cult, individuals were free to come and go as he pleased. There was no obvious pressure put on anybody to stay by Osho. But somehow the difficulty people experienced when trying to leave was commonplace as the outbreaks of the parasitic infections many of which medical science had no names for at the moment. Individuals would sometimes resolve to leave but somehow they were always there at the next day’s dynamic meditation. And they seemed to not know what you were talking about when you asked them why they were still there. When they ran out of money was when, generally speaking, adherents’ minds would be made up for them. Nobody ever found irony in the lack of empathy in a self-described God of compassion for those without the means to donate regularly. So many people were heartbroken having to leave. And Max could recall such tearful scenes of individuals having to be dragged out of the center onto the streets of Pune. In normally perceptive folk such dependent behavior would have seemed a warning sign. But just like the child they had abandoned at the train station, the details of such memories were forgotten by Max largely. He didn’t see any connection to his own behavior. He had become convinced by Osho over time that he was a true adept. He didn’t see what the concerns of those who were about to fail to find nirvana had to do with him who the non-existent God had kissed on the forehead gently at birth and provided him with insight beyond ordinary men’s ability to imagine.

Max Schein’s father was a dermatologist in the Valley. His mother was an executive at Paramount through the 1980s.

“They bankrolled everything,” he said to Lucky and winced at the memory of the midnight calls when it was coolly explained to them by an ungrateful son that a certain amount of tithing unto his religion on their part was required to keep him happy. There was never a thank you uttered by him. And to the best of his knowledge never a thank you asked for by either mom or dad who might have assumed Max’s dalliance with an objectively evil man was the fault of their overly permissive parenting style, and so their guilt served as a vocal filter for them. They didn’t see

Osho the way Max insisted they see him, which was the savior of humanity and somebody for whom pure wisdom was emitted like sweat in the precincts of Southern India ten months out of the year.

Now in his mid-forties, divorced of all spiritual ambition, successful in his chosen (though admittedly trivial) field of endeavor, all alone, and nursing multiple addictions at once, Max Schein seemed entirely worthy of the despair he claimed he experienced every time he examined his recent past. The fierce regret he felt now for his life decades ago he assumed was a type of penance he would be making until his dying breath. Mom and dad had died before their time no doubt partially due to the disappointment they experienced over their avaricious son. Osho, the Bhagwan (God), too, had sloughed off this mortal coil in 1990 at age fifty-seven to become, according to his followers, a being of pure light, omni-conscious and able to reincarnate himself as he willed at any period of time, for anybody, and as whatever creature he wanted and for however he long he chose to remain that way. When he died so it was reported to him by an awestruck journalist at the Associated Press, five thousand of the eight thousand adherents at his funeral required hospitalization having danced themselves into various states of injury in the hours-long wake that Osho dictated be executed at the occasion of his commemoration.

“They ripped the skin off their feet doing this circular dance of his,” Max told Lucky recalling both the truncated AP account but also the mixture of imagination and memory that filled the gaps of information for events of which there was a keen personal interest. Max Schein hadn’t been in attendance but he knew all about it, nonetheless. This phenomenon probably went a long way to explain so-called acts of telepathy and pre-cognition and the like. We all knew deep down with little direct experience of them what other humans felt. And occasionally what they experienced, too. It’s awful such realization because we were forced to admit we were not the mysterious and unknowable creatures we all took ourselves to be. Suffering and delusion are so common in this life that it’s impossible to claim of a stranger that they were ignorant of your suffering. It’s all the same really, not

mysterious at all. And really complete strangers were the best sorts of people to turn to when you were in emotional distress. They alone could see you for what you were. They alone might have understanding (but little empathy) for the monster you had turned out to be.

According to Max, some of the mourners spun themselves in circles until the blisters on their soles became so severe that they started to slip in their own discharge. Eventually they needed to prop themselves on another mourner's shoulders for support. It's not that they were impervious to pain but were impervious rather unto the physical implications that the arrival of pain held for a body. They were willfully dumb and blind to everything in other words that may define one as alive. Which is radically different it should be mentioned from being either dumb or blind as a result of some physical incapacity. Unlike a cripple they didn't have the excuse that God had cursed them in some essential way. Their behavior was utterly self-loathing and they didn't have any ability to articulate how they had come to this sad state absent of a push from anybody.

"If there is a God who watches over the world," Max told Lucky, "and he saw the ludicrous behavior that was occurring in his name, I believe he would toss the entire earth directly into the sun in no time flat and be done with it. He wouldn't even have to consider it. He wouldn't want to leave a single trace of his mistake for anybody to gawk at. Just like that. Into the sun in no time and that'd be that. And in the space of a few seconds a wrong would be made right. And there would be no trace of any of this nonsense that had happened. And no Osho, and no followers of Osho to stand as an embarrassment for all sentient beings who would consider themselves maybe better than the pond scum from which they had sprung originally."

Maybe at the outset of such an occurrence, Max said, there would be consternation amongst the masses for a short while.

"But over time they would come to see the wisdom of God's decision," he said to Lucky. "Because, look, for such an exalted being as this to have made such a mistake as he

had with humanity, so it must be said, a type of complete do-over should be in order and quickly as you might."

This latest Bloody Mary that he had ordered was minus the raw egg and had taken him less than five seconds to gulp down as the flavor of the first drink was largely devoid of charm for him.

"I don't think it's such a big deal having people die in large numbers as opposed to them dying one at a time," he told Lucky in a slower cadence than his previous bleat. As he had begun to identify all the talk about mass death pouring from his lips and the like as a first symptom that perhaps he had had too much to drink, if only relative to the early time of day. In an hour or so he would be at work and they would appreciate his presence even less than if he had showed up truly hammered. So when he heard himself speaking this last sentence he thought it might be time to order a cup of black coffee form the barkeep. Maybe though he was just acting loopy because of the revivifying he was forced to perform when considering Osho. Maybe this belligerence that had entered his psyche whenever the subject was renewed created a kind of drunk-like set of symptoms in him. Once his mind turned back to work matters he would be fine. They couldn't have made the Bloody Mary's that strong he thought if intended as a hangover cure. Even amongst the bar's sloshy clientele, he didn't see the purpose in making the medicine so strong that it provoked the opposite effect in the patient as intended.

"If I was to say shit like that nowadays, feel free to punch me in the face," Max said to Lucky and twisted his drenched pinky ring around the knuckle where it sat uneasily like an overlarge crown on the head of a bald and grotesque king. Max Schein was sick of himself and with good reason, owing to his confessions of the past half hour. Really here in America nobody cared about bad behavior toward foreigners. They didn't condone it surely but they weren't disgusted with it especially. Maybe finally all that the sick child's father had been trying to do was euthanize his son in as trouble less a way possible. And with this in mind, Max and his friends had done nothing wrong. Or rather they had done exactly as was expected of them. They were the ugliest of Americans, killers at their heart. If

they had ever become self-conscious about this attribute, it could be put to good use. But somehow through it all they still saw themselves as great guys.

The boy was dead surely as was the father who had placed his well-being in their pink and fatty hands. And you could say (or you could certainly make the point at least with a dismissive gesture) that there's no use crying over spilt milk. On the other hand, with some people, to paraphrase Faulkner, the past is not yet passed.

Altogether Max Schein had gotten into the wrong business. Hollywood was more or less an amnesia factory whereas his imperative had always been to strive for greater and greater levels of recollection. So he was always trying to reconcile his career with his own gloomy personality and failing miserably at it. Thus the need more or less constantly for morning binges. If you called Max an alcoholic he would deny it with every therm that he could generate. But let's face it: when the hangovers and the buzzes all run together in your life into one half-nauseating sensation it's time to give AA a call. Nobody wanted to admit it when they need help, least of all a man who didn't believe himself to be worthy of it. Max wasn't a bad guy once you got to know him. But the problem was you never got to know him past a superficial point. He wasn't a cuddly bear, someone who you felt you had known all your life upon first being introduced to him. It was all this self-loathing at his core that made him so distant. He felt he had a hard life coming and set out to create a self-fulfilling prophecy with every hangover cure he attempted.

If the child had a name, it was of course entirely beyond Max's ability to recall it. As it had been at best uttered only one time to him at the most while he was still on his death bed.

"Make one up for yourself, "Lucky Murchison told him when Max admitted this to him. In other words what damn difference did it make at this point what the boy's "real" name was? He was dead now and, according to Lucky, a piece of fiction whose memory was only kept alive by other pieces of fiction and eventually they too would pass on if they hadn't already. And then the child's identity let alone his name would be lost for all time. With this in mind, Max was entitled to make a name up as he was the only person

keeping the memory of the child alive anyway. He was the boy's father, his mother, all his siblings and the beloved aunt with the milky cataract on her right eye that kept the family together through force of will. He was entitled therefore to do anything he wanted with him, dismember him like a sociopathic child would with his doll on a whim, throw away some pieces and keep the rest in his pocket for use at a future time. There was no need to mourn a memory almost by definition. But memories of the dead are all we really have of them, right? And there's no need to even recall a loved one's name after the brief period of mourning has passed when recollecting publically is the socially correct thing to do.

For himself, Lucky Murchison had shed no tears at news of the extinction of his own progeny in the years of our lord 1969 and 1974.

"The first one was into all that hippie crap, see," Lucky had said to Max on a different occasion, though with similar libations, using his all-inclusive term for psychedelic drug abuse. The acid dropped onto sugar cubes that this boy had gobbled like so many Fruit Loops on a Saturday morning cartoon binge had (literally, quite likely) rotted parts of his gray matter in stages up until the point that he had lost the ability to function in any social situation whatsoever. This by itself wasn't a fatal blow. But the vine of gangrene that had bloomed out of a laceration on his ankle of which he had no knowledge of for several months thereafter was. Even towards the end spending his last days in the ER drowning in antibiotics he was unaware of his plight. He thought the squares were overreacting a little, tickling on his (now amputated) leg. He thought everything would be fine as long as his inner goddess willed that it would be so. Nothing happened without a good reason, after all. So at least he died without any anxiety at all.

Death number two belonged to son number two who had wrapped his Stingray around a telephone pole one chilly evening in San Luis Obispo and had his head bisected by the steering column.

"That one stung a little bit," Lucky told Max about the news of his favorite son's death, "'cause it was simply a case of boys being boys. It wasn't somebody getting

himself into shit that normal people wouldn't have anything to do with. But even with him a week later it wasn't anything I gave much thought to," he said. "He had a nice life while it lasted. A lot of money and girls while it lasted. He had a nice sort of way about him that made people trust him and give him their money to play with and use on God-knew-what and for how long."

With this in mind obviously, Max needed to see where Lucky was coming from regarding the guilt trip Max was laying on himself over the boy's fate. At the heart of all this self-recrimination Lucky assumed there was the conceit that Max Schein alone would be able to reverse this universal law. Indeed, this was the source of Lucky's distasteful reaction towards Max's confession. Schein needed to get over himself pronto in Lucky's opinion. He needed to see the suffering he had caused others was just a little bit of misery on a mountain of frozen misery that had taken millions of years to build, and would, if one climbed to its summit, afford a spectacular vista of the entire planet.

He was up to no good of late as the container of sulfuric acid that he had slogged in here with had ably testified.

"Ask me no questions and I'll tell you no lies," was what he told Nick by way of an explanation to Max when it seemed almost de rigueur on his part to ask about it. The skull-and-crossbones glaring out from the heavy plastic container's side invited the scrutiny. The message that was conveyed was meant to be anything but demure. It was supposed to be a conversation starter. It was meant to draw attention to itself.

The only scenario that Max could consider as to why the container was in his possession at the moment was that there was some monumental drain clog that required Lucky's attention and he didn't want to leave the container in his car where it might be stolen.

"I bet it's hard to buy," he said to Lucky when he first laid eyes on the container. But when Lucky didn't tell him if it was, he let the entire matter drop. After the first pass with him you knew enough not to make a second attempt at getting an answer about shit he had no intention of discussing. Probably he had brought the acid in here in the place only because he assumed Max Schein had enough

sense not to ask him about it. There was something he was doing with this shit that he didn't want to tell the world about just then. But then again it wasn't such a big priority with him that he couldn't be tempted into a drink or three with Max. Whatever it was could wait. But also it was urgent enough to require the services of a solvent with a skull-and-cross bones on its warning label. So here was the mystery that presented itself in the bar to those curious enough to actually see. Max assumed it would resolve itself in time. Max knew eventually he would be sitting in this very bar and hearing about the story of the sulfuric acid. All this shit that Lucky was into was very entertaining. In fact it was the inspiration for many of his screenplays.

This latest project of Max Schein's was a so-called true-to-life horror movie that had already been picked up by an international distributor in Sweden.

"Swing the ax horizontally like you're taking batting practice with it," Max told the Australian actor, Rob Court, playing the film's antagonist and demon of a thousand nightmares, James Fred Nathanson, the butcher of Hatch County in West Texas. Unsolicited and unwelcomed as the advice was having come from just behind the director's right shoulder, it was summarily ignored. When it was repeated a second time, the director turned around and told Max Schein to shut the fuck up. The morning's boozing was already apparent in the prominent folds of his face and in his unmediated behavior. The director told Max to get a grip on himself or the security people lounging around this Studio City set would get a grip for him and not let go.

A *faux pas* to say the least for a lowly screenwriter (for despite his producer's credential on this project that's what he was) to start bullying actors right in front of their boss, but this judgment would not take into account the toxic effects of the Bloody Mary's he had imbibed hours before. He wanted to start a fight with somebody likely if only to further increase the judgment against his previous behavior and thus increase the rate of his expiation as well. For their part, Rob Court and the director merely saw an insubordinate little cuss being insubordinate. They didn't take his back seat directing as being any extended cry for help. They saw it rather as a typical Hollywood power play, albeit one more vulgarly executed than others. They didn't

think there were any ulterior motives dangling off of it like broken braids off a weave that needed to be taken into consideration. They saw its distinctness only in the forwardness of the action. There was no sneaking about with him and to the extent that it could be in such a stressful situation this was appreciated. They saw nothing deeply held or soulful in the outburst. It was merely childish. If Max wanted to be a director, he should queue up properly and try to become so legitimately. There oughtn't to be any shortcuts taken in this process. If he wanted to be some sort of rebel who didn't believe in going through the proper channels for things he should pack up his things and leave now. And good riddance to him.

Not that this scene required much in the way of any serious concentration from Rob Court who was possessed of serious acting chops despite the present role he was inhabiting.

"If I meant to cut their fucking arms off, I'd've cut their bloody arms off. Without any preamble," Rob told Max Schein of his character's motivations a minute later. He had seemed to have chewed over the suggestion Max had provided regardless and found it quite illogical given the strange parameters of James Fred Nathanson's persona.

Quite a gifted practitioner, James, of the sanguinary pastime of serial killing. Logic dictated, therefore, that this sort of obsessiveness would bar him from taking "batting practice" with the tool he used for carrying on what amounted to his artistry on the forms of his fellow human beings.

"He's an artist with the blade," Court said to himself mostly paraphrasing a bit of lyric from *Sweeny Todd*. This was not surprising as Rob had portrayed the titular character in its Australian debut ten years back. His baritone was shallow but his histrionics were explosive. "The greatest Todd of them all," quoth the *Sydney Morning Herald*. But somehow the success had not yet transferred stateside. And here he was in a high grade slasher flick doing his best to preserve personal dignity and his reputation at once.

There wasn't any plot per se to this picture except for the twisted motives behind James Fred Nathanson's actions (which, let's face it, were as foreign to normal folk as the

consciousness of a bat). In real life what James Fred liked to do was dismember his victims two at a time then reattach their parts on the other person's torso. Likely he was trying to create entirely new beings out of the mess he had made a la Victor Frankenstein. He was trying to peer beyond the mere physical equipment attached to human willfulness and see what survived the rending of body from soul. A true mystic he in the tradition of the cabbalists of the Middle Ages who insisted that both of these qualities were deeply intermingled. Where one travelled, the second was sure to appear eventually. But history could testify that none of these monstrous creations ever exhibited much in the way of spiritual dynamism. If you laid there and rotted silently for extended periods eventually you would have to doubt the categorization of yourself as a human being at all. More like a human being-shaped pile of rotting meat whose upper lip had been stapled to the gum line to mimic a smile (this last detail in fact was a JF Nathanson specialty. Thus the gaining of the moniker Smiley Face Killer as the years progressed and the body count grew.) It didn't sit well with those who pre-supposed the notion that the soul outlived the body. There was so much contradictory evidence to the contrary. It didn't seem to hold to any sort of serious scrutiny whatsoever.

Please carefully remember that in that suppositional realm which was sometimes referred to as real life, the Smiley Face Killer could not in any real sense be considered a philosopher even by the degraded intellectual standards that the world found itself in deep into 1996.

"I reckon," Rob said to the director, name of Esposito, "that I should just run up and chop."

Well, it sounded like a good place to start if only to move the story forward. The nexus of this scene was ninety pounds of horsemeat wrapped in blue jeans and denim. The meat was bought fresh off a truck that drove around the studio's back lot just for this opportunity. Sixty cents a pound the Mex sold it for or some absurdly cheap number like that. Of course nobody around here asked where the meat came from. Some eight year old's beloved pony once it could be guessed. Esposito the director liked to use raw meat because it lent the scene the verite aspect he was going for supposedly. When the cut was into plastic

or Styrofoam or even into, God forbid, one of the actors, the body language was all wrong. The blade or hatchet or even the chainsaw when it sliced down needed to get stuck momentarily at a bit of bone and certainly the spinal column shouldn't be so easy to slice through either. With method actors you would figure all this would be taken into account but somehow the right dynamic never emerged. They never got the mechanics of the act correct in Esposito's opinion. They always needed a physical real world prod to remind them of the act they were committing.

If they were horse lovers all for the better. In murder there was a sense of cruelty that was seldom conveyed in slasher pictures. Or maybe all of this was being overthought by him extremely. People wanted to eat their popcorn and watch this shit unfold. Merely to them it was empty fun.

Esposito showed Rob where and for how long the axe should be held in place once having entered through the flannel shirt that hid the horseflesh from ordinary view. Soon he yelled action and told the cameras to roll.

Ten feet behind both of them Max Schein was recalling for himself a scene witnessed in Pune just as he was about to fly back to the States for lack of money of a cow dead in the airport road.

"It's interesting what they do, the way they handle it," he said to the shoot's lone grip, an East African named Joseph Simione later at the commissary trailer. This mobile unit had been set up in an unused lot overlooking a particularly rough-looking patch of the San Gabriel foothills. Every so often coyotes would come down from these hills and dig around the garbage containers. So it was that when Max arrived workers were constructing a plastic barrier around the entire area to keep these critters at bay. They seemed to abhor the animals' presence more than they logically should have. Something about their feral tendencies had put the spook on whoever was in charge of oversight for this area. They didn't want nature dictating its own rules of conduct regarding when to encroach and when to stay back as it seemed to be doing in this instance.

According to Max, the way authorities in Pune handled such an occurrence as a dead cow in the road was to bring

in a local Brahmin and have him utter a prayer prior to the removal of the carcass.

“India being India, that could take days,” Max Schein told Simione recalling that in his instance they were after ninety minutes hesitation forced to get out and walk, leaving their baggage in the hands of local street porters. Flies had gathered over the carcass in the meantime as had a familiar odor of physical reclaiming but nobody there at least found this especially off-putting. To them it was not such a horrid occasion but a strand of life that was well within the fabric of normalcy. There were neither blaring horns at the scene nor a sense of outrage that this had been allowed to occur. They didn’t see why a westerner like Max, for instance, would admit consternation at the possibility of a missed flight. It seemed to them that there would be other flights leaving regularly of which he could board with no problem. They didn’t see why when it had occurred Max Schein began to curse his luck and wonder after the wisdom of visiting India at all.

Osho by this point was long gone out of Max’s picture and was being hassled by Indian authorities enough to think about leaving the country entirely.

“I couldn’t help thinking at least in my mind there was some connection between these events,” Max said. “I couldn’t help thinking a plague on humanity had descended when the light of the world had been extinguished,” he said to Joseph. “Maybe this was just the start of the misery I would encounter. Eventually there would be plagues of locusts and toads falling from the sky and the like,” he said. “I was that into the man absolutely to believe that this was so,” he said. “I couldn’t help thinking a monumental sort of error had been made on my part when I made the decision to leave.”

Well, needless to say he made it to the airport regardless and nobody was the worse for wear because of it.

“But there were still things that I needed to do that I didn’t do on account of my fear of him,” he said to Joseph. “And even now sometimes he comes back to haunt me in dreams. The way he slurred his s’s like a snake takes me back to his ashram whenever I hear it. I don’t know why he did it but whenever I hear somebody do it now it always

reminds me of him and I recoil from it. He was trying some sort of mindfuck on you when he did it like hypnosis or something. Now every time I hear it makes me want to get a gun and shoot whoever is doing it in the face."

His problem with Osho was that he had assumed Max for the phony he truly was. It hurt deeply to be told you were the person that you secretly feared you were all this time. Even though you had taken every precaution and adopted every artifice to make believe you weren't, you were still convinced that this was the person you were. In his eyes and through his duplicity a mirror had been held up to Max's true self. This of course wasn't intentional on Osho's part as the good con man was first always a flatterer and only a truth teller when he was sure the mark in question was very far away and asleep. And so it was two losses of a sort had transpired upon his separation from him. Both Max's guru and the image of himself as a hero of his spiritual quest were lost forever by his betrayal. Osho liked girls and the younger the better. Nothing wrong there, but he was perhaps too dismissive of the need for discretion when dallying with a man's daughter or young wife when he was in the other room. By the early seventies, when he arrived in Pune his behavior had broken free of whatever flimsy limitations he had placed on them previously. He saw himself as a God to whom any version of proper moral conduct should not apply. If he had the power to do so he'd have wiped clean whole continents because of the smallest slight to his aura of eminence.

In the presence of such a narcissist generally the tendency was to give him the benefit of the doubt. If he esteemed himself so much the first impulse was to affirm him as capable of great things. It took time to peer beneath the shiny surface of a rampant self-promoter. You had to watch all the half-truths and empty truths, all the bullying and manipulation unfold first hand to get a sense of what resided underneath and what such a person was truly capable of if at any point his self-evident gloriousness was submitted to skeptical inquiry.

For somebody like Joseph Simione, this sort of obsessiveness with a long dead person who had not hurt him physically in any way might seem self-indulgent

forward to the point of prissiness. But surprisingly this was not Joseph's view at all.

"I have heard, I have seen. For myself," Joseph Simione said to Max Schein when it came time for him to reply. Presently coming down from his Bloody Mary buzz, Max was trying to be slightly more agreeable with others than he had been while calling out directions on the set. He needed a friend at the moment and Joseph Simione sensed that he was one of the few crew members who would talk to him. The rest took him for some sort pretentious trouble-making dandy what with his many rings pierced ears, jet black goatee, narcissistic personality traits and speed freak loquaciousness. So new to this country perhaps Joseph found Max merely exotic as opposed to annoying. He lacked the context perhaps to take Max for the overripe hipster that others had. Maybe he assumed he was touched by something divine and if so his transgressions were forgivable. Maybe he him saw him as the Holy Fool Max had once seen himself as while wilting under Osho's noxious influence at the ashram in Pune.

A recent arrival to the States from a UNICEF refugee camp in Uganda, Joseph was communicating to Max that there was no translation required when considering the activities and characteristics of objectively evil men.

"We sat for days on end hunched on our ankles," Joseph said recalling the ordeal that did not end for him until 1985, when in a very real way, he was delivered. The refugee camp he was referring to had been taken over by a local Uganda warlord whose name of all things was John Smith. Daily the food shipments received via air drop from an uncomprehending UNICEF was trundled out of the twin warehouses that it was stored in and put on display by John Smith's men. But only the compliant or those that showed themselves to be were allowed to eat and then only a little. John Smith had needs for various warm bodies, you see, and the activities of which they were capable. He had a need for uncompensated whores, cannon fodder, and capos who would keep and recruit starving people for both of these former categories. He didn't speak Ethiopian or Italian or Portuguese at all. This was the reason he was recruiting people as opposed to forcing them to work at gunpoint. If he actually tried to communicate, there would

be so much that was lost in translation he assumed that he would have a blood bath on his hands. But realize what the UNICEF food meant to those whose diet consisted of insects and dirt. So once a day what he would do was put on a type of burlesque review with the food. There would be eighty pounds bags of wheat that he would rip open and scatter to the wind like the ashes of the dead. He'd stare out at the crowd and silently dare people to rush forward towards the open bags. People sat on their ankles hunched over to avoid the bullets that whizzed over people's heads. Once "volunteers" were gained, these alone were given a little bit to eat so that their duties could be completed promptly. Only enough to make them functional, not satisfied, let alone healthy. He wasn't an intelligent man, John Smith, to judge by all appearances but he had an innate ability to coerce and intimidate all those he felt he needed to at the moment. He assumed far more would die of starvation than a gunshot wound in this instance and he was right. Even though dying of hunger, walking skeletons like Joseph somehow managed to restrain themselves. And those he took for slaves were no better than zombies. He didn't have to worry about them at all. He could shoot one of their children in the head right in front of one of them and he wouldn't have to worry about any of them even casting an angry glance in his direction let alone doing something substantive about it.

When he got to the States a year later, Joseph's first order of business was to buy a forty pound bag of enriched flour from a wholesaler and keep it in the closet in his tiny room in Charlotte, North Carolina that was his first American residence. Eventually Joseph made it out to Los Angeles to live with his cousin in a one bedroom flat just off Colfax. The bar that Max had been drinking at this morning was well within walking distance of his flat though Joseph never visited it. He had completely lost a taste for alcohol over the years. He didn't see the allure of its ability to provide temporary escape if its effects were only temporary.

Now he was married and dependent on this union position for gainful employment for the foreseeable future.

"It doesn't bother me anything you do like it does with others," Joseph told Max Schein and smiled at him when it

seemed for some reason he had been misunderstood. Not that Max was a threat to him but he learned over so many years not to make enemies unintentionally. He didn't have a reason to take Max for anything other than what he claimed himself to be which was a man who had suffered under the sway of a tyrant. As for what he was doing there in the first place this was not a question that he had even broached within himself as he had assumed some sort of unmentioned cruel circumstance had placed him in that position to begin with. He didn't have another explanation, didn't see why one was even required. It would have been beyond unreasonable for a man to submit himself to any sort of tyranny voluntarily. And for all of his swashbuckler type of persona, Max Schein did not seem a fool to Joseph. There was a hesitant side to the man that Joseph appreciated greatly. He spoke about dark things which meant to Joseph that he had likely learned from them. Not the mark of a person dead to the world intellectually certainly. Furthermore about Hollywood's legendary pecking order Joseph Simione was utterly contemptuous. He didn't think anything of one producer making a comment to another. He didn't think anything of it at all.

Strange that they treated Max that way. Then again Joseph was able to admit that there was so much he didn't understand yet of America and its inhabitants. Eventually he too might become jaded like Americans seemed to be and begin to roll his eyes at Max's or somebody like Max's approach. Maybe there was a violation of social graces on-going of which he was unaware that would require his attention someday if he was ever to fit in. He would know he arrived in this country when he was dismissive like them, rude like them, and most of all empty like them of the appreciations for the freedom from despotism that this country brought like rain from on high constantly as a perpetual gift from God.

They would come here right on this very empty lot and be made to squat down like he had once been made to in the Ugandan refugee camp. And then they would understand what a loss freedom was and be mournful of their former dismissive attitudes they held towards their country. Perhaps they would not be given that opportunity at all and simply be shot in the back of the head at first

opportunity and buried in the kind of mass graves Joseph observed being used by the warlords a mile outside the camp in a remote enough area that they could deny was theirs when they were accused of war crimes. Once placed into such a container no soul would be allowed to migrate to heaven, Joseph supposed, but rather remained in the septic earth mingling in with the air and poisoning everything for miles around. They would be dead twice in other words in such a place: once to life and once to God on high. And nothing would grow at the gravesite until the end of time.

Maybe they would experience an epiphany about their former behavior and not require any such rude awakening beforehand.

“I do not see you as anything like them,” Joseph said to Max Schein paring down his thoughts in a simple sentence. Well, look, this might have been wishful thinking on both of their parts but so it was Joseph’s perception at the time. He saw Max Schein as somebody absent of American arrogance completely. Maybe not quite an ally but he saw him as somebody who could be certainly trusted to keep a secret. At the very least around these premises he was as close to an African as any white man could become. He had the sorrow in his eyes that inhabited men who had suffered privation. He had the look of somebody who would know what you were talking about when you talked about the emptiness in your heart unto death even though you were drowning in the midst of California sunshine at the moment and everybody else was smiling.

As he said this to Max there was a bell that sounded on the set fifty feet away. This meant that they were about to start shooting again.

“I will see you back there,” he said to him then waited right at the edge of the lot the slightly overhung the shallow gulley where the San Gabriel wilderness started.

The coyote pup that had been abandoned by its mother was halfway up the nearest hill as if waiting for Joseph’s return.

“Tomorrow I will bring a hammer to bash your brains in and end your pain,” Joseph said to it in his native Amharic. Hard to say how serious he was about this act as he spoke of it so quietly that any ironic intent that was meant had

been completely disguised. Joseph had love in his heart for all creatures likely. But he knew death was preferable to life for so many creatures. He knew the angel of death was the angel of mercy for so many misfortunates of the world.

But nobody should see him kill the pup. For if they did they would get the wrong idea about Joseph immediately. He wasn't a butcher hardly. Merely he was somebody who had lived through hell, and knew what it was to be merciful to those less fortunate than himself. Americans seldom understood the difference between mercy and self-righteousness and this he found indescribably cruel. But for himself he was determined to be an angel of mercy. The angel of mercy in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church you should know, Suriel, was also the angel of death. But once you survived a famine you realized such a bicameral roll was impossible to maintain indefinitely. Joseph Simione was not a deep thinker hardly nor a man laden down with the musty philosophy of the centuries. He would not require a thousand words for that which would be better off articulated by a single action. He knew enough to act, but not enough to explain if only to himself why there was a need to act. He didn't have a learned voice in his head. Famine had burned these away irrevocably. But he was gentle and kind or determined to be gentle and kind to creatures weaker than him. And he had no tolerance for those who didn't see things from the same dark perspective that he saw them or at least gave lip service to the fact that they had.

Out here if you turned your back to the gulley that ran astride the studio and faced the hills to the north you could imagine yourself back in a central part of Ethiopia, the foothills to the Highlands where the PCK rebels who had killed one of his brothers hid themselves from view of the government troops.

"We will see each other again," he said, not to the grunting pup (who was still by his side having still been in the midst of devouring the turkey sandwich Joseph had provided to him), but to the kaleidoscopic memories that this half-desertified landscape provided him as a kind of gift for venturing out here to start with.

At the top of the hill Joseph could clearly see a figure standing still watching him as he watched back intently,

fearful that if he blinked he would vanish from out of the nowhere that he once emerged.

This is the sacred place, Joseph Simione thought just before returning to the set that he had not been two hundred yards away from the entire time. Of course it might as well have been eight thousand miles and a hundred and fifty years. Eventually he would climb the hill and never come back. By that time the pup and everything else he loved would be dead by his own hand. He would make sure of that before any of this was attempted. He was above all else a merciful man.

# Chapter Four → (October, 1996)

According to the old Rwandan legend, Gihanga the Conqueror ruled the entire earth from a palace made of the bones of his vanquished enemies. The palace was in the sacred forest of Buhanga next to a lake shaped like a perfect teardrop that perhaps fittingly lacked a name or real location either in this existence or any other.

"*He wore a mask shaped like a face*," Dr. Menen Khan told her new roommate Jane Harley via the personal computer with a voice-replicating software whose blue/green graphic interface provided the only light in the apartment's living room. Of late, she had complained about bright places and the cluster headaches that light gave her. Oftentimes she liked to close the curtains at sunrise. And even before her disfigurement she never had watched TV.

Nowadays when Menen communicated she was compelled to use hand gestures as an embellishment to her typed words. The computer voice that emerged from the computer seemed so foreign to her that immediately she was certain that it was not flawlessly repeating her script but rather embellishing it, commenting on its ineffectual nature and the need for better words to be chosen altogether than the ones that were presently submitted. The computer's voice was a male voice and devoid of the ability to place a dramatic stress on any particular word or phrase so it seemed it was slightly mocking the words' sentiments as they were programmatically repeated. Metallic and dead, the voice performed its job only

functionally. Menen Khan kept having to look back at her screen as the program gave voice to the words she had typed. She assumed that there was a bug in the program and she kept on looking for proof that this was so. The proof never emerged but she kept on looking anyway. She kept on trying to refine the words she gave it to make them more palatable at least to her ears. She didn't mean what it said. She was constantly regretful about taking the machine off its leash. The computer voice was possessed of a mendacious spirit. She kept on writing letters to the Delaware company that had donated it to her upon hearing of her tragic circumstances seeking to have them inspect its innards and send her an updated copy via the mail.

Not trusting the voice to broadcast her words' true intent, increasingly Menen Khan began to gesture with her hands as a supplement to the voice in an attempt to replace what had been missing from the soliloquy which was the emotional undercurrent that the words were meant to ride upon.

"*The mask had a face on it*," she said to Jane Harley of Gihanga through her computer's dead voice. She touched the plaque of scars on her own face with a delicate brown hand, "*but it was not a mask. It was not a covering of a face but rather the face itself. The face underneath the mask had disappeared when it became concealed by it. So the mask had disappeared along with it and become the face. Which is the case with every mask. Or at least what the wearer hopes to be the case when he finally forgets which face is his or why he ever wore a mask at all.*"

When speaking "*he ever wore a mask at all*," the computerized voice seemed to hurry past the word *wore* and pause on *mask* as if having decided the clause's object had more interest for it than the action. For the computer, the mask was existential and self-contained. That was to say, a verb and noun at once. One did nothing with it truly, just as one did nothing with the black abyss itself in which both mask and wearer, Menen and computer, were situated. The abyss was of them and alien to them at once (for this was the human condition stated in a very few words). Merely one would observe their existence from whatever side of its concave countenance one chose to and wait in vain to be observed back. God's face you might say was a mask with nothing on the other side. But no mask

was truly conscious of the face it was meant to conceal. Computer voices realized this instinctively (could one say this of a bit of software?) perhaps. But it was something only the most desperate of men would ever admit to and then admit to reluctantly and then tearfully, as if in an attempt to recreate the sacrosanct in the corner of a single bloodshot eye had gone awry and there was only an occluding mess left behind.

"*At times like these*," Menen said, "*he was not a real person. Gihanga. Or something entirely made up. There was a third possibility, obviously, which was the status of a legendary figure rooted in truth can transcend the common reality. He instead becomes a mix of historical fact and mythical personification and is granted immortality after physical death simply by the distortions of perceptions that are created by his usually monstrous deeds.*"

According to Menen Khan, PhD, Gihanga the Conqueror in real life was a garden variety warlord who crossed from historical figure to myth entirely through the facilitation of creative—as opposed to common—violence to achieve his ends.

"*He liked to castrate the boys of a particular village he conquered*," Menen reported to Jane Harley via the auspices of the personal computer, "*and wear the dried parts around on necklaces that he forced the mothers to make for him*."

Sometimes, Menen said, not in so many words, Gihanga would entertain the masses by boiling his enemies alive in a closed iron kettle resembling an African bore. The screams of the dying so it was related had faintly resembled an African bore's grunts while foraging. Sometimes the tusks on the bore were removed and children were thrown into the kettle to mimic the sounds of a feeding sow. It depended on the mood of the crowd at the time, Menen reported. It depended on how fierce the battle was that preceded it and what sort of comic relief was required, therefore. Sometimes a particular village would get off with just the boys' castration, and the enslaving of young women. Sometimes half the surviving population, women and men, would be forced into the kettle to provide some laughs unto so many Gihangan soldiers whose nerves at the time understandably were understandably a bit frayed.

Gihanga was a man of the people, at least of his people. But he didn't subscribe to any modern notions of non-psychotic behavior in any of his political dealings, which was to say in any of his military dealings, in any known account.

"*In the modern age he would be locked up after being convicted of war crimes*," Menen, who was an Assistant Professor of African Studies at USC, told Jane Harley, but this time not through the auspices of the PC at all. Rather she was using her hands and the physical language she had nearly spontaneously created with them. This point apparently was important enough to her that she wanted to make directly. Using an interpreter would have been nearly useless in this instance. She assumed the ironic and subverting voice of the computer would have fucked it up for her regardless even if she tried it. She would have assumed it would have been just one more instance where she longed for it to be gone from her life entirely and there would be no attempt on her part, therefore, to use it at all.

It was Menen Khan's conjecture that no modern day analog to Gihanga the Conqueror existed other than those who were in possession of masks themselves and tried evil things on their own recognizance. It wasn't the same hardly as their deeds affected at the most small groups of individuals. Whereas Gihanga despite his bloody inclinations was a founder of a country as well as a culture. These modern day equivalents were mere freelancers and had no real serious aspirations toward kingship. Unlike Gihanga their mendacity seemed random, trivial. They would never make the jump unto myth. They lacked the divine spark for the most part. Their faces were always partially visible just beneath their loosely tied masks.

The last mask that Dr. Khan had seen firsthand was the one worn by her attacker just over a year before. He was standing on her welcome mat in the hallway outside sporting the visage of Spiderman's nemesis the Green Goblin, shifting nervously from foot to foot in worn Brown Floresheims as if he had to pee.

"My first clue," she had said of the mask via a pen and paper to the detective months later to take her statement, "was that something was wrong was in the way it clung to

his head. It was an angle and half-tied. As an anthropologist it was something I noticed immediately."

In other words, this masking wasn't in service of ritualistic communing at all. Though Menen Khan was ignorant of the practice, people in the modern realm wore masks for many reasons. The most obvious being to keep their true socialized identity a secret when perpetrating a crime. Didn't matter how they thought of themselves when they were in the crime's midst. They were simply opportunists rather desirous of evading capture. Up until that second she never had considered that this was even possible. Too much time spent in musty library shelves and grad school seminars to be able to detect the obvious. That many people could be both below history as well as above it was an obvious conceit. And for the people beneath history's goose-stepping progression, masks were not a surrogate face and not even masks at all.

Also there the thick black rubber gloves that the attacker wore extending one inch below the elbow that might have seemed so much overkill if he had been an overage trick-or-treater attempting to simply not touch the candy that might have been intended for another or maybe simply avoid skin-to-skin contact as much as he possibly could.

"He is all the way behind you now," Jane Harley told Menen Khan from her position on the living room's couch and immediately wished that she hadn't. Having grown uneasy at the morose turn this conversation had taken, she wanted to refocus Menen's thoughts on something altogether more sprightly. If only for her own good, it wasn't mentally hygienic to have this gruesome event on constant playback in this apartment. Such reminiscences didn't seem to lead to the possibility of catharsis. On the contrary it seemed to make her revivify if only at a low level. It turned her back into a victim which was the personification of helplessness and something which sane people would want to avoid at all costs.

A psychotherapist might have told her the same if she had gone to one.

"*He wore the mask at an angle*," Menen said to Jane through the computer. "*But as far as I could tell his face was on straight*."

With morphine circulating in her body unto her mind twenty four/seven, Menen Khan found it hard sometimes to determine who exactly was wearing the mask at the moment. Linguistically, if not psychologically, subjects and timeframes seemed to blend into one another when she was on the stuff often in the same sentence, running on for hundreds of words and often petering out at an incomplete sentence, exhausted by its own complexity and having lost the reason for existence in the first place and needing to start over just to discover its reason for being. Beginning in the early eleventh century (Gihanga's time), then, an unstated comma later, transitioning to the latter twentieth century, Menen Khan's patter had meandered wildly, tossed around by the pain-blocking pharmaceuticals that addled her speech to the point that it was sometimes difficult to understand her desire to communicate at all. He had the mask at angle but his face was straight. Her Green Goblin attacker apparently was being alluded to in this sentence to judge by the violent context in which it was uttered. But the more one hung around Menen Khan post-attack, the less easy this assessment became. Maybe she was talking about another Rwandan king altogether named Gihanga. The attack and its myriad memories and subjective impressions and false perceptions that had spun off of it like so much sweat pouring from a witch doctor's thrashing headdress was always overwriting current perception, not to mention current thought, distorting what was there and sometimes deleting it completely and interjecting its realty into a separate reality, like so many bits of viral DNA-injected into a cell's half-opened chromosomes. Jane Harley in particular never knew exactly what she was precisely alluding to precisely. Words and their concomitant mental images skipped around in Menen Khan's drug-addled psyche like a warped record on a phonograph. Because of her mind's protean nature it was impossible to say what song was playing inside of her at any given minute. Menen Khan had lost the roadmap, the album's liner notes so to speak, long ago. So a single thought or a single expression invariably became many thoughts and many expressions at once. The mask was at angle but the face was straight. But weren't masks and faces the same thing according to her? Didn't she say that

just a minute ago? Wasn't that why she was talking about this Gihanga in the first place?

Menen Khan now wore a mask which was her face formed of striated scar tissue that had formed over a period of weeks as her body tried to heal itself in stages from the sulfuric acid it had been immersed in for a shockingly long period.

"You're doing fine," Jane Harley said to Menen as if she was merely fishing for a compliment the whole time and turned her back towards her.

Thumbing idly through a copy of *Vogue* that had been inexplicably left under one seat of a commuter prop plane in the invariably bumpy ride from Salt Lake City to Laramie, Wyoming, Jane was trying invariably to disengage herself from the moment's conversation, and therefore to disengage herself from the moment's sympathetic pain as well. Look, having arrived only recently on the scene, Jane was more or less ignorant of the attack's whys-and-wherefores, its primordial theories and its raw physics and its epilogue, and even the true depth of the physical and emotional damage rendered unto her by the man (one assumed it was a man) beneath the Green Goblin mask.

"Gihanga had twelve wives but only one God," Dr. Khan said to Jane Harley from her portable bed whose back rest had been raised slightly to allow her to read so many of the books and academic journals—*African Archaeological Review*, *Philosophia Africana*, *Zambezia*—that had been laid out on her bed open with the covers down so she could resuming reading an article from one of these without having to search for the correct page. Not so obsessive about such matters usually, Menen had grown increasingly wary of time's passing in the past six weeks or so entering the fourth month of her injury. Also there was the need for her to do as much reading as she was able to each day independent of flipping through a particular journal's pages to see where she had left off. Circumstances such as the type she found herself in presently generally gnawed at her self-confidence and therefore at the ability to ignore her own mortality if only for an hour or two. Presently she was in touch with her own department head via email daily. She hadn't signaled a time when she felt she might return to teaching. Once out of the hospital and with the majority

of bandages off her face she had gradually stopped communicating with her colleagues. She had no desire to see them, as the expression ran, face to face. Given her mental condition and physical experience she was in no shape to see anybody absent of a kind and tactful demeanor. Only somebody like Jane who understood the parameters of physical suffering and knew enough not to cast aspersions at somebody who was presently in its grip was tolerable. And even she of late was wearing out her welcome.

The one God that Gihanga the Conqueror embraced according to Menen Khan was the version of the Abrahamic God as filtered through the perceptions of Mohammad of Arabia and encoded in the Holy Quran.

“The first Muslim convert of the region was this king,” she said to Jane Harley repeating the assertion that, for some reason, outraged her non-believing father to no end. Maidul Khan preferred Gihanga rather to exist on a plane above religious orthodoxy or ideology of any kind. A pure killer rather in his imagination, whose motives behind his violent actions had nothing whatsoever to do with salvation of the Islamic variety or performing an act of jihad. To Maidul Khan, Gihanga killed merely because the feeling of his spear penetrating once uncompromised flesh gave him pleasure. It felt good to him to do this so he did it. And there was nothing else to say about this matter at all.

The fact that so many ceremonial masks were found in archaeological digs in Rwanda pointed to the notion of an animist King whose mind was unencumbered by the constraints of monotheism, but Menen Khan regardless had still promulgated the theory reasoning that absent of a sub-Saharan imam perhaps a type of proto-Islam incorporating animist ritual had taken shape organically.

“You never know what can happen,” Menen once typed into her computer but declined to hit enter afterwards, “when people are left to their own devices.”

When Gihanga knelt in prayer on his five times daily obligation he prayed unto Allah, according to Menen. But this Allah was of the wind and rocks and trees, more so than He who had been segregated from his creations by his own seeming indifference towards it. In such an understanding, God was everywhere, omnipotent and

omnipresent in both one's surroundings and, the conclusion needed to be arrived at if one was honest with oneself, in the countenance and blood of one's enemies whose wounding was by extension a sacrilege and something that should be punishable, according to Koranic Law, by beheading via scimitar or some such similarly capable instrument.

Once converted, once submitting to God's will, given this understanding Gihanga could not continue with his plundering ways logically. So it was he that in the midst of his reign resolved to empty his heart of all enmity of his fellow men, free his slaves, and live a life of humble resignation in the midst of the sacred forest of Buhanga, next to the lake shaped like a perfect tear.

"*The way to God is the way to peace amongst all nations,*" Menen Khan told the computer again refusing to transfer into the dead insectine speech of the computer program where its meaning in all likelihood would be immediately lost just like drops of water dripped into an enormous fire. To her it was the culmination of her work as an anthropologist, the culmination of the work of all anthropology and something that should be proclaimed constantly in every classroom where this subject and all other subjects were taught. Her father, needless to say, had disagreed with this assessment. He had proclaimed that he had known all of Allah and his many representatives in the world and that all of them had as much to do with peaceable existence as a sea slug did with the creation of the Hallelujah Chorus.

Maidul Khan was fond of saying that when considering the Eternal imagine yourself floating in blackest space and praying to it.

"It will receive your words like it receives the belching of a supernova or the spontaneous creation of a sub-atomic particle via the laws of quantum physics," he had said to Menen once when this "Gihanga worship" as he called it was broached. To him this was Romanticism of a deeply vulgar kind, anti-scientific and anti-traditionalist at its core. More than anything it was disrespectful toward him, her progenitor, who had over the course of so many decades made his feelings about such matters clear. He thought all meaning was circumscribed by tradition and outside of

tradition. No real meaning in the sociological sense was possible. Outside of tradition he thought there were simply rivals to tradition and personal whims that could be rationalized as deep thinking only insofar as the person who held those whims had an ego stuffed to the ripping points and beyond.

No, Gihanga, as far as Maidul Khan was concerned, was more animal than human being and more comic book legend than a true mythological figure who had something to teach the world about itself.

“But, then again, it is not my department, exactly,” he was fond of saying to his daughter whenever the subject was broached on the rare occasions they saw one another. Look: Maidul Khan, as judged by Maidul Khan was not dogmatic about anything and could admit that he was wrong at least in the broadly ironic way he had mastered over the years that admitted no sense of the meaning of his words even as they were spoken emphatically. Because the fact that he wasn’t dogmatic about such matters in his mind only reinforced the notion for him that he was right all along. That everything he believed was scientifically verifiable simply because he was so open-minded and subjected all types of knowledge unto a scrupulous test. He didn’t believe he had any gaps in his knowledge. He thought that the philosophy department of which he was a member subsumed every other department and gave the philosopher every right to speak on matters of which he had no direct knowledge. But he felt despite it was in his best interests to be humble. He had plans of course that needed to be acted upon in secret. Short term he felt the need not to fight with anybody, to make it seem that he was devoid of strong emotions regarding this issue. Just beneath the surface he was inconsolable, however. He didn’t see the need to try and understand. And he felt a mortal wound to his tribal culture had been rendered which he was struggling to contextualize even now.

Action would be taken and grievances aired regardless of the injury to his personal stature (and whether in a certain light the activity would be seen within the bounds of civilized behavior let alone the bounds of sane conduct at least in the Western connotation of the word). But if his daughter was hurt, assuredly it would be her fault.

Retribution seldom occurred *ab nihilo*, after all, absent of a first cause. In other words he was not the one who had started it. But his darling daughter would survive regardless of the punishment meted out, Khan was sure. She had a toughness to her that belied her slight build and the wide brown eyes that seemed incapable of deep focus and therefore the ability to filter out the hurtful bits of life that left a mark when they landed in her general vicinity.

Presently in her apartment Menen Khan was mostly asleep and choking up on a bit of chemically charred flesh that had broken loose from her scarred trachea sliding along unto a particular bronchiole to be coughed up in earnest later on.

“You need a drink of water,” Jane Harley, told her anticipating the coughing storm to come and rose to walk into the kitchen. Pneumonia was a constant threat with Menen Khan even months after the attack. But more to the point the coughing had alarmed Jane to no end. Likely nothing could be done about it but maybe water would help slightly. She would hold the cup for her as she sipped from it. And then as the coughing started she would stand behind her and wonder if this roommate was better than the last one, even though she was objectively a nicer person by several orders of magnitude.

Jane Harley had moved in here straight off the commuter jet from Laramie on a referral from her reassignment surgeon/vet who had become familiar with Menen ’s case through the newspapers. He knew one of Menen ’s doctors and made the appropriate calls. He thought it would be best for them both.

Menen Khan’s body and mind had been in a manner of speaking reset by the attack but reset to a self-destructive mode. Trying to summon the will to live for her was a task that needed to be initiated daily. Generally she found this motivation through human contact. The long steep path downwards to nothing that death represented itself as in her dreams was temporarily obfuscated through the type of mental overgrowth spurred through a mind occupied by the presence. Once talk faded, invariably this path would become more clearly defined, steeper to the point that she felt herself from a distance being tilted towards it. She had assumed over the past few months that this dark tendency

would be with her for the rest of her life, however long that might be. Modern medical science with its various surgical techniques and pharmacological interventions held no ability to relieve Menen Khan of her depression. Many of her doctors, her surgeons in particular, produced optimistic prognoses in their consultations but their downcast facial expressions revealed their true sentiments about her case. They saw her case as both a challenge and an attempt to satisfy a long frustrated need to produce work *pro bono*. They were jaded about the face lifts and nose jobs executed on various members of the Los Angeles over-class. They saw themselves as better than that by significant orders of magnitude.

Good doctors, real doctors were they, selfless servants of the roiling masses. And who was more roiling or at the moment more worthy of a selfless servant than Menen Khan? She was in every respect a victim's victim, a *pure* victim in the imagination of the still-influential MSM. Perhaps a little too dark-skinned and furrowed of brow to be a pure victim for their liking but nowadays news outlets like *Time* magazine possessed software that could digitally retouch any image permanently, washing away the physical imperfections of sub-tropical ethnicity into something altogether purer, Aryan, and untouched by the sensuality of the Orient. A Final Solution accomplished by computer code, as it were, devoid of crematoria or any conspicuous human participation at all.

The miracles of this closing century were too many to elaborate upon in one sitting. And, sick as it was, this all played out for Professor Khan's advantage. Famous plastic surgeons of the LA basin hardened by success and malpractice suits looked at her digitally altered "before" photo in *Time* and actually wept. Afterward, they couldn't be convinced to not volunteer their services, pardon the double negative. They were competing to be the first ones in during the consultations, insulting each other's abilities to an alarming degree for those who had assumed their life-altering vocation to be above pettiness and worldly concern. But the sadness of their eyes at these meetings belied their confident proclamations. Despite their bravado, they could only go so far. Irreparable damage had been done relative to the modern medical horizon. It

was in God’s hands, so to speak. And God was the icy motherfucker who had allowed this to happen in the first place.

“I think you need to have your bandage changed,” Jane Harley said to Menen after noting a faint but particular septic smell emerging from one of the old gauze-covered wraps curling up at the edges.

According to the first two of Menen ’s doctors, the initial but by no means complete list of injuries she had suffered as a result of the attack included:

- Third-degree chemical-induced burns stretching from the top of the septum toward the skull
- Substantial deterioration of the submental area that required substantial skin grafting to avoid disfigurement
- Partial deterioration of the exterior of the trachea
- Significant acidic erosions to the ligaments that operated the lower mandible (jawbone) to the upper mandible
- Fistulas that had formed along the lower lip ranging from one to four cms as a result of both acid erosion and necrosis resulting from same
- Significant necrosis along upper and lower gum line
- Significant erosion of upper and lower canines and four anterior molars (Apparently she had been made to swallow a bit of the spirit salts she had been attacked with. Or she had done so accidentally when foolishly trying to catch her breath.)
- Partial deterioration of upper palate resulting in a single eight centimeter fistula opening into sinus cavity
- Significant scarring of lower sinus cavity (see above items for pathology)
- Eighty percent deterioration of nasal cartilage (see above, etc.)
- Sixty percent deterioration of cartilage of right ear including the middle ear structures
- Blindness in right eye due to distortion of cornea which was in turn due to deformation and severing of the optic nerve
- Permanent follicular damage on right side of the skull requiring hair transplants as a palliative treatment

- Possible psychosis due to stress incurred from all items above
- Definite PTSD due to stress incurred from all items above

The last two items would have to await confirmation by the nearby hospital's chief psychiatrist when he finally was free to examine her, but everything else for the doctors was self-evident and was awaiting medical remediation by either them or one of the myriad of other doctors queuing up behind them in an attempt to do some good in the world. They assumed a fifty percent success rate but they had no real hard data to support this number. They didn't know how many surgeries it would take to reach this number. As a group they were planning to bullshit her about the amount of interventions required.

They didn't think there was any benefit in being frank with her about the extent of medical care she needed. Really, the surgeries were an ordeal only slightly less heinous than the original attack. They realized themselves in a backhanded way as agents of her continuous victimization. But they thought deep down that her comfort and well-being were inferior concerns relative to her treatment's positive outcome. They were men of the world in this fashion. They had learned to rationalize expertly and had no qualms about their own techniques and the reason that they were involved in the case to begin with.

Well, if Menen Khan wanted to get better, to improve her admittedly tragic circumstances presently, then she needed to be prepared to bear a certain amount of physical distress along the way.

"*They look at me like I'm a fucking ingrate*," she said to Jane of the coterie of doctors who would hover over her at the outset of every appointment like a gathering of nearsighted rabbis near an ancient and damaged Torah, struggling to tease guidance from the chaos. Well, just of late, through surgery number five, she was ungrateful and had assumed that the prognosis was grimmer than they were letting on. According to them, they couldn't say for sure if her speech patterns ever would return to normal after the hole at the top of her palate was repaired

completely during surgery number six. According to them there was a certain variance in the outcome for such a procedure because of the metal plate that they would be putting up there in place of the eaten away bit of flesh and cartilage. Every so often the salivary glands would overcompensate for its presence and cause non-stop drool to flow. Which amongst other things would slur speech to a degree. Also the brain would need to learn to reposition the tongue on the new and foreign surface, and sometimes this could be accomplished in a couple of weeks and sometimes not at all. People formed words with difficulty regardless in the aftermath of such a traumatic event and the percentage unto which one came back was, according to her docs, entirely up to the desire of the patient to heal.

Thus, with a single sentence they washed their hands of any potential medical failure prior to its having taken place. They knew what they were doing on this score, having worked on difficult cases in the past and they weren't about to defend their actions or prognosis outside a court of law and even then they were inclined to simply clam up. In their minds they had established their angelic bona fides simply by taking this case. Somebody who was receiving so much free medical advice wasn't especially entitled, they felt, to bitch about its quality. It wasn't their fault that she was in the state she was in certainly. Acid tossing wasn't an activity that any of them (or really anybody they knew) had indulged in of late. But eventually they knew there would come a point in her treatment where a series of options for further treatment would be presented to Menen Khan. Every bit of charity had its end point obviously. And past the twelfth surgery the returns, let's call them, would diminish precipitously absent any real breakthrough in surgical technique such as a full face transplant that was in its early experimental phases in Germany presently wherein a face of one baboon was being grafted onto another and then refastened in an attempt to come up with a robust enough heuristic to create a touchstone for further research into this procedure worldwide.

In all candor, Menen's doctors felt neither pity nor contempt for her. Rather they tended to view her as a type of laboratory specimen who possessed a set number of

physical limitations. They wouldn't see, therefore, her rejection of further physical intervention on their part as a rejection of them personally. They were clinically detached from the matter despite their enthusiasm for it and could readily see an end point being reached regardless of whether or not they unanimously felt it would be in Menen 's best interests to continue on. This was all contrived, avant-garde stuff they would be trying on her anyway past surgery number seven. Apart from Pakistan itself with its backward tribal ways there was no real control group for acid attack victims that existed in the world. Past a point they wouldn't be able to say really how much harm they were doing relative to how much good with her. They wouldn't see her refusal of further treatment when it came as anything other than an ordinary response emerging from a subject of a clinical study. It should be expected at some point, on the contrary. Humanitarians that they were, it shouldn't be something that oughtn't to have pushed back against her when it finally came.

For now everything would continue as per the doctors' timetable as the alternative for Menen Khan would have been to leave her in her present physical condition for the rest of her life. She couldn't live without the constant use of painkillers which by itself at the moment was deeply problematic for her long term well-being. More to the point was the extensive scarring on her face that had made her seem less than human or more a type of humanoid mutation springing from the hemichordata phylum, a featureless enormous acorn worm. This was true at least on the right side of her face as the tissue continued to grow and fill in the deep flesh wounds rendered by the sulfuric acid as the months progressed.

"It's interesting to ask how this occurred," Menen said to Jane Harley after the dirty bandage had been swapped out. In reality Menen could do this for herself but it gave Jane something to do and allowed her to work off the nervous energy that otherwise would have gathered inside of her until she would have to leave the apartment altogether. Always in Menen's presence she was on pins and needles waiting for something terrible to happen somehow as if a curse had been placed on her that was somehow contagious to those who were in the same room

with her. Menen's physical appearance Jane had long since gotten used to and in many ways this was the least disturbing part of her. The computerized voice had given her the creeps. She was waiting for the time when it could be turned off for good.

Jane wasn't a nurse hardly and had little desire to care for somebody night and day when she was in need of care. But she was devoid of any place to go. Thus she was constantly attempting to find ways to ease the anxious feelings that Menen seemed to radiate. In her present state she was merely half-formed. She needed to complete her inquiry into what she would ultimately become. The attack in this sense was a mere catalyst for her. Menen needed to turn into that which she was destined to become. It didn't seem a human shape hardly. Jane could look into Menen's one functioning eye and see that whatever had been human inside was gradually morphing into something else that would mirror her outside appearance better.

Menen was explaining to Jane for the umpteenth time just then the exact mechanics of the attack upon her. This subject above all things Jane Harley found intolerable, a type of attack by itself whose burn marks existed only in the listener's imagination after it was all through. The explanation was appallingly matter of fact and left no impression that she had formed any sort of explanation about why it had happened. The attacker was utterly unknowable to her because of the mask. And if he had no mask likely he would be unknowable to her then as well.

"*Once the acid vapors get down into your throat it becomes impossible to scream*," Menen reported to Jane through the auspices of the personal computer then inexplicably asked for a cigarette. Of course she couldn't smoke but wanted a cigarette nonetheless. If she possessed a cigarette probably and merely she would simply manipulate it with her uninjured hands or maybe dangle it between her fatty and peeling lips as if she was actually contemplating lighting up. Maybe it was an imaginative exercise on her part executed as a type of self-therapy. She wanted to theorize what it would be like to smoke and therefore make it seem that she was able to smoke and thereby make it seem that she was not the

physical wreck she actually was. Maybe she wanted the cigarette for another purpose entirely that had thus far eluded Jane Harley. She wanted to horde it or something as if she was in prison or unwrap its tobacco and see if she could find other uses for it altogether.

By the time the portable bed was wheeled back into her room she had at least momentarily forgotten the desire for the cigarette. Perhaps she was obsessed presently by another hankering altogether. Or the morphine had momentarily derailed that train of thought. As was her want over the past few weeks she was requesting Jane Harley to kill her. It emerged as a meek little utterance spoken only once. Which seemed to imply that she wasn't so keen on Jane to follow up with it regardless. She wanted one enormous pillow to descend on her head and never have it removed until she was absent of life. But maybe it was just the drugs talking.

Jane Harley wouldn't do anything about it regardless. It was absurd really for her to be asked to do something so intimate by a relative stranger regardless of how much pain she was in at the moment.

Only when Menen was back in her room and given a dose of phenobarbital that threw her into a black and dreamless sleep did Jane Harley feel comfortable enough to walk out of the apartment. Everything up to that point had seemed to be too dire to simply abandon. She realized that it wasn't her duty to take care of her roommate night and day but this was the duty laid out in front of her. She had no intention of being accused of the neglect of somebody who had become a media darling over the past few months. She knew herself as somebody who, because of her recent change of gender, would be treated with disdain in the wider culture. There wouldn't be any sort of sympathetic treatment of Jane if they had realized who she was in another incarnation. They wouldn't see her as a human being with needs of her own. Merely she would be somebody who had done wrong and continued to do wrong. There would be no impetus to see her as the societal victim which she undoubtedly was.

She had learned through harsh experience to tend to her own wounds and not ask for sympathetic treatment

from those who might consider themselves full of compassion for all of God's creatures otherwise.

"I saw a movie on cable the other day," Jane Harley said to her therapist Karen Kaminkoff an hour after clicking the apartment door behind her, "about a serial killer, a male, who wore women's dresses. Maybe he was a serial killer before he put on the dresses, or maybe he was somebody who was driven crazy by the act of putting the dresses on. The movie didn't say which it was exactly. But he was crazy because of what he wore not in addition to it. That was made clear. In the audience's mind one of these habits couldn't be separated from the other. They saw all the queers of the world as potential serial killers. They're saying that putting on a dress while you owned a penis made you a serial killer. They're saying that you're worse than a serial killer just because of the way God made you."

The movie on cable which was viewed at three in the morning by Jane was called *Now You See It* written by Max Schein and directed by one Allan Smithee, which was the Hollywood pseudonym of choice nowadays. This flick never made it into the theaters and was presently being circulated through the familiar distribution track of television in the 1990s. There was a video cassette available of the film in addition that could be rented at a Blockbuster Video store nearby. Within a year it would only be available through mail order. Within ten years it would be more or less unobtainable except in Brazil. The cineastes of that nation had seen the film as a satire on the horror genre and as such held the film in far greater esteem than those who saw it merely as a vulgar and slightly botched slasher flick. But regardless of its shortcomings there was a message to be derived apart from the Grand Guignol which was that the evil that was loosed upon the world was unpreventable as any hurricane that made it ashore. The film's writer would have strenuously denied that his script was homophobic but the plot's implications were clear. He saw the dress-wearing as a metaphor for something more ineffable and fey. Confined by the genre's conventions, the writer lacked the ability to elaborate. But if you caught him at a weak moment drinking Bloody Mary's in a Sunset Strip dive bar he would tell you as much.

Jane Harley was in the midst of what was described as the maintenance phase of her aftercare. As such much of the psychotherapy was not especially goal-directed. She liked coming here to Karen's office, nevertheless, principally because it was situated along convenient bus lines. She had no expectations for the therapy's outcome other than it would make her feel slightly better about where she was as a person at the moment. The surgery for the moment had cured what ailed her. She had no real reason to be here other than it was part of the treatment plan for what still classified by the DSM-III as a psychosexual disorder. Also, there would be flack from the insurance companies if she stopped going. There would be cause for denying her further care later on if that was needed because of her lapsed commitment to her own wellbeing.

On her wall just above the patient chair, Karen had hung a black and white photograph of a vast grasslands somewhere in Nebraska.

"Tell me about your day," she said to Jane and stared deep into the image which by its position seemed imperceptible from staring into the face of the person seated just below. "I want to hear about it," she said to Jane. "I want to hear what's on your mind and how you're handling your transition."

Ten months since the reassignment surgery had taken place, Jane didn't really have any thoughts about her "transition," as Karen called it, at all. More to the point, and this was something she stressed to Karen on those rare occasions nowadays when it was mentioned during these sessions, the surgery was the best thing that could have happened to her from a mental health perspective. This was not to say that she still wasn't troubled, lonely and nearly and broke and living in difficult circumstances with a disfigured woman, but the reassignment as far as she was concerned was well behind her. It had liberated her rather than haunted her, and left her with the sort of giddiness that had been largely missing from her personality past the age of nine. It troubled her only in the sense that as it had been accomplished there was little solace to be taken in the notion that it could still alleviate all her misery at an instant. Now she was unhappy, but unhappy at a very

banal, quotidian level. She missed being a freak slightly, a woman trapped inside a man's body. She missed being somebody who psychoanalytic journals studied and pronounced incurable, somebody whom evangelical Christians suggested should be institutionalized forever or even murdered outright where she stood. The very revulsion that others were all too eager to express about her made Jane Harley seem that she was special in some deeply wrought way, that there was some peculiar quality that they became hysterical over whenever it was demonstrated in sufficient enough qualities that made it impossible for so many otherwise introverted citizens to keep quiet about and suppress their murderous thoughts altogether. This might have been an entirely perverse sentiment but she felt the secret that she possessed gave her insight that so many others lacked. Normal folks didn't know what gender identity was really, having taken the trait for granted all their lives. At a point their identity became entirely subsumed into their personalities like so many sugar cubes dropped into warm tea. They couldn't understand why a man would ever feel himself to be a woman or the other way around. For them there was nothing to gender beyond the genitalia that the good lord blessed you with and to claim that there was indulged a type of demented expressiveness that could only be termed as maladjusted even by the louche liberal types up at the Easlen Institute who even now refused to countenance any sort of gender confusion with anything but the familiar type of Freudian condescension mixed with their own arrogant attempts to re-align a person's sexuality into something that conformed more to their own square understanding of what gender was all about.

Karen Kaminkoff for herself held no pre-conceived notions of how to treat a transgender patient. Simply this was because over the course of years she had lost interest in psychotherapy in general and had no motivation to theorize about her clients' predilections, positive or negative, at all. She had the fifty minute hour down to a science by this point regarding her personal comportment and admitted neither concern nor disinterest nor contempt nor empathy towards those who sat in the chair on the opposite side of the desk from her. She was bored out of

her mind by sessions like these but had developed over the course of years certain unconscious physical cues that mimicked a dispassionate interest in what was being talked about at the present moment by those people all too eager to have a shoulder to cry on. She would sit on the edge of her chair for example and open her hands and raise them slightly when some sort of emotional apologia was being indulged in by those who for the most part were prompt with their payments and didn't give her any back talk about her psychoanalytic acumen regardless of whether they felt she had actually understood them at all.

"I think you need a better living situation than the one they provided you with," Karen said to Jane having heard the recap of the past day spent with Menen Khan. This was one day like so many other days she had recounted wherein she was more or less a slave to Menen's suffering and the whims that arose as a result of it. It sounded like un-distilled misery to her what she was going through. But then again she didn't know why Jane was bitching about it. The obvious solution was to leave. It didn't make any sense to simply grin and bear it at least for as long as she was being forced to do so apparently. It was a simple thing to have to do to avoid such sustained unhappiness of the type Jane was describing. She shouldn't have to be somebody for whom a type of slavery was in order simply because her roommate seemed reticent to seek extended treatment from proper medical channels. She shouldn't have to be somebody who was made to serve when she herself was seen to be laden with so many troubles and was in need of a helping hand herself.

Whenever Karen talked she kept her eyes focused on the black and white grassland just beyond Jane's right shoulder. By staring into it intently she had learned that she would be seen eventually as somebody listening intently. In the grassland, contrary to her office at the moment, there was any number of objects to occupy her attention if only in ten minute increments. Multi-colored pheasants, for example, were present at the bottom of the four foot high grass blades peering nervously out at the camera as if they had somehow become temporarily aware of its presence. A slight breeze had descended on the grassland also at the instant of the shutter's snap. And in

the various angles that so many of the grass blades had assumed as a result, Karen could recreate the feel of that gentle prairie wind in her office, a lazy type of vortex that mussed her hair slightly even as it cooled her skin. Somehow the office thermostat was perpetually stuck at seventy eight Fahrenheit. Karen was constantly having to redo her makeup at two thirty each day because of the damp and warm climate in here.

When she was nine-years-old she and father had taken a cross country trip eastbound wherein Nebraska's famous grasslands were crossed. Even though they hadn't stopped long enough to so much as pick a few choice blades for themselves.

"You could wade into it six feet from the road," she had often told her boyfriend Cole Stewart during those precious rare moments where such woozy reminiscences were apt to be recalled by either of them. "And then you'd be lost for the world for good. We had pulled over on the highway's shoulder for some reason. And I did just that until it was time to go. It was like *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* where you disappear into a row of clothes into another world. Six feet off the shoulder," she said, "and then you were in another world. I said to my dad one day I'll come back out here by myself and never return. I wanted to see what was on the other side of the Looking Glass. I wanted to see what the other world was like if only because I thought there were so many things about it that needed to be seen to be believed. I thought every mystical realm was a mystical realm of its own. I thought I was the only one who would be able to go there just like the girls from the C.S. Lewis story."

All well enough, Cole thought, but it didn't have much to do with the world that they now lived in, shacking up in cheap apartments and living the type of provisional existence that both of them, had they been polled, would have been certain that they would have left behind three years out of college once their respective careers had been kick started. A fantasy type of existence this, as far as Cole was concerned absent of real responsibility, and as the distance invariably grew between them in subtle ways he encouraged Karen to keep such fantasies to herself. He didn't find their airing to be remotely helpful and as they

discouraged a rational type of processing of their current predicament, he felt in many ways that they were profoundly unhelpful, just like getting shitfaced constantly only without the physical side effects.

He didn't for himself see what any of this grassland shit had to do with the price of tea in China. The suggestion that they should just pack up and move to Buttfuck, Nebraska was a non-starter for him. He had seen that picture in her office and found it boring and clichéd. He thought a good living could be made in that area being in possession of a riding mower and an entrepreneurial spirit. That grassland could be raised and replaced nicely with a nine hole golf course. Just for example. He didn't look at the image and see any mystical talking lion magic. It spoke to him rather of underdevelopment and the harshness of nature when it was allowed to encroach past a certain limit onto long neglected landscapes where the people are too few to have a demonstrable effect on it. Bad things happened out there likely simply because it was out there and not in a place with a strong police presence or at least a place where one had ready access to the implements associated with socio-economic development.

"I close my eyes routinely," Cole said to Karen later that night when for some reason the grasslands picture had made an appearance into the increasingly edgy dialog they shared with each other at the end of every day, "and imagine paradise as a construction site for any sort of building you might want to mention." This latest apartment of theirs was in Reseda which was a hard slog over from Karen's office in Santa Monica. No way to get over the hills expeditiously except northbound on the Dime. And this needless to say was a troublesome journey five days a week. It left her in an even more anxious mood than would have been the case otherwise. Often a sixty-five, sometimes a ninety minute commute on the ride home. And the awful thing was the drive's unpredictability. Sometimes it went relatively smoothly, but sometimes the Dime was a parking lot with pretensions of being a major thoroughfare.

Cole's crack about a construction site came from all his daytime TV watching of the past few months he had been engaged in wherein so many unemployed and

unemployables traipsed across the screen daily in search of something to do.

"I don't understand why somebody doesn't take care of these people," Cole had said to Karen on another occasion, conceptualizing all the wretched refuse of *The Jerry Springer Show* and *Maury* as a single class: "these people." Just like Cole, they weren't at work at the moment. But unlike him they didn't have any marketable set of skills at least to judge from the vulgar responses that they offered to whatever car wreck of humanity was up on the stage at the moment, those noisy sufferers of cuckolding and out of wedlock childbirth, the ones in need of shaming that was to say but not by so vulgar a pool as this.

To a person they couldn't form a grammatically correct sentence if they concentrated on the task. Or maybe they could and their refusal to do so was an act designed to alarm. If any of them had the ability to obtain long term employment for themselves, it was being hidden from view on these programs. A lot of impromptu swearing, a lot of unrestrained exclamations that seemed to mark them at least in Cole's understanding as people incapable of sophisticated discourse from anybody with a different racial group at any time. This in turn seemed to suggest, at least to him, that they were all sufferers from a type of low-level brain damage. It seemed impossible to him that any of these people could ply even a blue collar trade long term such as working construction. Their minds were too disorganized for that he thought. He couldn't see any of them even making it as a counter person at McDonalds. Probably you needed to have basic literacy skills for that. Probably you needed to be able to tell time for that or at least care about what time it was so that you could show up when you were supposed to.

Again, maybe it was all a type of misunderstanding on Cole's part, enabled by an incomplete perception of who was in the audience for these shows. And also lingering racist sentiments that he would have denied possessing vociferously if he was ever accused of the same. Regardless, he was sure at the moment he was right about such matters and there was some form of slow moving social rot occurring in this country which would prove to have disastrous effects long term. He himself had had

been unemployed only two months but he was seeing the world in increasingly stark terms because of it. Eventually he would have to buy a gun to protect himself against so many of the people he had witnessed on TV daily. He couldn't understand why they were like that. If they were like that, he couldn't understand why the federal government didn't step in and take proactive measures to ensure that the rot would at minimum be contained. There was a need for more construction sites in this country, so to speak, less empty fields of waving grass. There needed to be men put to work in trades that they had a chance of excelling at. And solid middle class housing would in the process be built of which Cole and Karen could partake in and save their relationship which was in danger of being sacrificed to the all-powerful Gods of real estate of the Greater Los Angeles Area and quite soon.

This townhouse in Reseda that they were in now had eight hundred square feet and a set of bay windows in front that peered across the street to a Denny's, one of whose booths of late Cole had been using as his office just after the breakfast rush when he would be allowed to sit there for six hours nursing a single cup of coffee or sometimes just a glass of water. The walls of this unit were perilously thin and no thought of soundproofing had been put into their construction whatsoever. Whole conversations from the next door unit could be perceived with relative ease by simply sitting on the couch and muting the TV. They kept late hours over there in addition and Karen especially was constantly being roused from her sleep by a clock radio's activation or even the television in that unit's bedroom when the volume had exceeded a certain level and it might as well have been plugged in next to Karen's head.

No bugs certainly in this new place, no ebony-skinned trespassers whooping it up in the community pool like the old place on Melrose, and no low-level sense of physical danger. The neighborhood was not disintegrating and no proactive measures needed to be taken. For here in Reseda in a manner of speaking there was no actual neighborhood, just the dot dot dash dash of wretched capitalist excess: strip malls followed by planned communities followed by giant box stores stretching from freeway to mountain and back again.

For himself Cole Stewart wasn't so jaded that he would speak ill of the Valley in general or Reseda in particular, but this place hardly seemed like home several months after he and Karen had decamped for it.

"I spoke to the landlord this morning about the walls," Cole said to Karen who as was her custom the past few months had emerged from the townhouse's bedroom in her bathrobe minutes after returning from work. There were loose cigarettes in her bathrobe pockets and sometimes she would partake of one while waiting for their frozen dinners to cook in the large microwave they had bought at the Target down the block as a moving in present for themselves. "He said we can do anything we want to just as long as we don't drill into the structure," Cole said. "We can put up anything we want to just as long as we don't mess with his equity. We can play our own music day and night if we want to as long somebody doesn't call the cops on us and he's cited for it. Bottom line he doesn't care as long as we don't drill into his walls. To him this issue's all about the structure and we have to work within this structure whether we like it or not."

Based on his research at a nearby Home Depot, he told Karen that because of the landlord's strictures their options were limited in this regard and short of a bit of fiberboard backing there was little that could be done to allay the sense that they were cohabitating with the neighbors upstairs as opposed to living near them. Probably this would filter out five decibels of a fifty to sixty decibel (if the neighbors were in a frisky mood) problem. The rest they would grow accustomed to simply by ignoring it. Cole was assured by the expert at the Home Depot that this could be accomplished over the course of several years. They would have to simply accept the inevitable and let the noise pour over them like ocean waves. They would have to be assured that this was the only way it could be in the given circumstances and abandon any hope that it could change for the better through their personal ingenuity. It would be a difficult mindset to orient themselves toward. They were Americans with certain notions about the rightness of personal initiative, and this sort of passivity was frowned upon by their culture. They couldn't shake the feeling that things would always get progressively worse when they

were willfully ignored. They didn't have the ability yet to simply let go. It didn't seem right to them to do so. It didn't seem an efficient let alone a moral way to comport yourself when it seemed at least superficially that something effective could be done.

Something effective that actually could be done was for them to move again maybe to a freestanding structure where at least the eructations of gassy neighbors, say, could not be divined in one's sleep.

"I think we've got a good thing going here," he said to her from the living room couch where he flopped for the moment so as to avoid the sight of her in the slightly stained bathrobe. The romantic phase of their relationship was definitely over. But it annoyed Cole slightly that she was forgoing giving it the old college try. She had taken him for granted completely by this point. She wasn't even trying to cover this reality up now.

In reality he was saying this merely to mollify her temporarily, to keep her from stating the obvious which was that it was through his lack of gainful employment that they had wound up in this type of dump in the first place. The next move Karen made in all likelihood would be on her own. Which was fine but right at the moment he didn't want to have it thrown in his face that he was not pulling his weight in the relationship. The last interview he had been on was three weeks ago and for fifteen grand a year less than he had made at the station. And with every noise that was heard from above the reality of their economic circumstances was made clear to him. Only people without the means to leave wound up in these sort of places. It was project housing for the lower middle class. Only people who had forgotten their better selves for the most part would inhabit one of these apartments gladly and think of it as home.

You couldn't run from the truth of architecture hardly, which was why deep down Cole Stewart had been against the move out here to Reseda in the first place.

"Fixed the leaky faucet," he said to her recapping the entirety of his productiveness for this day as well as several others before it. Unfortunately the neighbors upstairs had just returned home and it seemed that one of their feet was in danger of breaking through the ceiling at any point. No

insulation up there obviously nor any soundproofing layer that might work against the illusion of them being surrounded on all sides by angry, loud men. More than anything the noise worked against the vibe that Cole had been struggling to create in the past few minutes for Karen in order to placate her, to convince her that this was a nice enough place and unrelated to any tenseness in the relationship at all. The foot crunching indeed was loud enough that he would have to raise his voice to be heard. And this in itself obviously was a signal that something was wrong. Because why should one have to shout after all when one was in a completely private area. There was no point to such behavior whatsoever.

This noise in the room at the moment was such a distraction that Cole needed to turn on the TV so he could clear his head and think about what to say next. By this point Karen had retreated into the kitchen to check on her half of the frozen pizza that they were heating up. Whatever moment he was planning for had long since passed. Everything he would have said from this point forward would have sounded entirely insincere. He was significantly better off just lying on the couch and watching TV. He was out of ideas entirely about how to improve their lives together.

CNN was on just then, and as usual they were offering non-stop coverage of a single event which was a sarin gas attack in the subways of Tokyo wherein any number of people had died.

“What is Aum Shinrikyo,” the snowy haired CNN anchor spoke into the camera as if truly asking an audience member to explain it for him. Of course no person with a general knowledge of world events in the United States (and likely in Japan as well) had heard of this group prior to this moment. Here was a cult that so many people were ignorant of that for months on end after the attack had passed people would have assumed that their name had been invented wholesale. Even now it seemed CNN was playing for time, attempting to locate a single person who spoke both passable English and was knowledgeable of the group to the extent that he or she could speak intelligently about them for the two minute interview cycle that TV had reduced all serious inquiry to nowadays. The reasons for

the attack even now were, as the hack journalists on the tube said “shrouded in mystery.” Of course the snowy haired anchor on CNN was too much the consummate pro to speculate wildly about such matters. He wasn’t saying, only theorizing, or simply framing the occurrence, and only tangentially linking what had just happened to other more recent instances of U.S. terrorism such as Tim McVeigh’s recent successful incursion into enemy territory in downtown Oklahoma City.

Every attack, according to some terrorist “expert” that CNN had on during the fifteen minutes Cole was watching, was different. This might well be true. But, on the other hand, Cole knew every attacker was more or less the same. This he knew from his days at channel 7 spent out in the streets of LA and the parking lots of Ojai turning an electronic eye on the wretched refuse of the world. They all had the same story for the most part, and it always involved salvation through supernatural intervention, be it from the traditional churches of south central LA or the myriad of wacko cults that southern California had become famous for over the past several decades, springing up like mushrooms from shit as if their ascendancy was a biological necessity not, as it seemed to Cole, a sociological tragedy of the highest order. Now to attain salvation there was always a price to pay as well, as if whatever supernatural entity that these poor souls had become enraptured with were impoverished or emotionally needy in some way and required constant reinforcement through words, deeds, hard currency or all three, about what a swell personage he (or she) actually was minus the Biblical tragedies and the myriad of genocides that were allowed to occur on his (or her) watch unbidden. All acts of mass violence in the world originated from some manner of religious faith Cole Stewart thought, and then briefly struggled to justify this statement. In all likelihood this Aum Shinrikyo had a leader at its center who had declared himself to be God. As an ordinary human he couldn’t very well justify such a status so he would have had to have been crazy. The monstrous soul that he housed required a suitably extravagant exterior to justify its existence. His people needed to be convinced that they were acting in a wholesome way prior to letting the sarin gas loose. They

needed to be shorn of self-doubt completely concerning their own intentions before they would take such action against objectively innocent people.

Just the way it was nowadays and likely just the way it would be up until the end of human consciousness for good.

“These terrorists all need a taste of their own medicine,” Cole mumbled to himself hoping the TV was low enough for Karen not to hear about these cultists. Then he changed the channel. Nothing to report here anyway and nothing to be learned. CNN was a tape loop of the nightmare of history. It would never end until nature intervened and put an end to the human race altogether.

On the other channels, however, there was the usual melodramatic bullshit coupled with lurid aggressive fantasies of high living plutocrats.

“I’m checking the mail,” Cole said to Karen Kaminkoff who nowadays was entirely blasé about him going out unannounced anyway. Indeed the mailboxes of this section of the development was at the bottom of its main entrance, down a slope that ended at the main road twenty yards on. Convenient enough for the mailman obviously but when one had to schlepp out there in flip-flops on a cool evening to retrieve one’s correspondence it seemed like a deeply negative feature. Neither of them had the eye for such a detail when they had first moved here back in May. If anything they thought all the mailboxes in a central place would allow them to get to know their neighbors slightly better over time.

Generally if one resident of the complex saw another at the mailboxes they would hang back or stride the other way simply to avoid having to make small talk with them.

“Nice seeing you again,” Cole Stewart said to one resident emerging up from the slope as he strode down it taking mincing steps with his flip-flops so as to not topple over onto his growing belly. If the neighbor had heard him, he kept it to himself and pretended to be lost in the correspondence pressed into one of his bulbous mitts. Looked like a Publisher’s Clearinghouse advert he was lost in at the minute, one of those pieces of junk mail that had *Resident* as the recipient. Then again, he might have been truly interested in what Ed McMahon had to say above the

friendly greetings of his neighbor. *If somebody ever breaks into your house, friend*, Cole thought as he fumbled in his pants pockets for his mailbox key, *remember this moment when you start to ask why nobody would chase them off*. It's a bad idea generally to shit where you eat, he thought. It's a bad idea generally to pretend not to notice those who will be in a position to do you a good turn or bad turn whether you care to admit that this is the case at all.

He wasn't so much offended by this slight as somewhat surprised by somebody who was beholden to him would not at least grunt in acknowledgement when a friendly greeting was offered.

"Don't know what this world is turning into, not at all," he said to himself, recalling the neighbor's impassive face as he passed Cole by. Maybe he had a greater sensitivity to such slights because of his employment status. It was gradually gnawing at him, eroding his confidence. Maybe he was taking offense at something that he shouldn't have. Or taken it to a greater degree than he should have.

Probably he would see the man again at some point and then he would have the opportunity to make things right with him. Or maybe he would develop a thick skin himself and return the slight.

Didn't know at the moment which it would be. Well, he wasn't lingering over the opportunity hardly. He wasn't thinking about proper ways to behave or proper ways to take revenge against rank strangers at all.

He had shit to do, believe it or not, capital to acquire, whether or not the workaday world chose to acknowledge his ability to take care of such matters. You asked Cole to do something and he'd do it. It didn't matter really what he had on his plate at the time. He had capabilities that was to say, the ability to focus beyond all reason until the job was done. The reason he was laid off in the first place certainly had nothing to do with competence and everything to do with the television station politics that he admittedly was not so good at and prayed he was never desperate enough to get good at through the rest of his life.

"When I had it all in front of me, there was nothing that could stop me from seeing to it," he said to himself then felt around for the baggie of Jamaican Kush in his pants' pocket. Nowadays he was forced to smoke his shit outside

as Karen had frowned on the habit like so many other things he did. Out here, unlike the last place off Melrose, the pool area was kept under twenty four surveillance. He couldn't get high reclining on one of the chaise lounges like he had on so many other occasions in the last apartment. Or at least he thought it wouldn't be a very good idea to do so just at the time.

If he was arrested for possession, quite likely that would be the last straw for Karen and he would wind up living in this awful place by himself. Well, one of these things was certainly bad news. And maybe for all he knew they both were. He couldn't sort his true feelings out about this relationship just at the moment, as it was changing from hour to hour. He felt fairly sure rather it would sort itself out as people, despite all their romantic bullshit protestations to the contrary, regularly did what was best for them and only that. So whatever was best for Cole as a person in the long run would be what happened. He didn't have to worry about that shit any, he felt. He didn't have to make anything happen along these lines.

Merely it might have been good to know. He was curious that way. Or at least he wasn't so inured to his own suffering that he didn't give a damn about what happened to him.

In the mailbox there was the usual tripe including his own Publisher's Clearinghouse missive announcing that he already may have won. Also there was a bill from CalEd that Karen would probably ignore until he was forced to pay it from his own bank account with a handwritten note devoid of an envelope that had been fastened with scotch tape so as to be deliverable and folded over in thirds.

"***Only the real niggers of the world know how to eat in Little Ethiopia!,***"

was the first line of the note, handwritten, that was apprehend-able through the pale green paper that looked ripped from an old-fashioned steno pad. Mr. Chiduai Amani was the note's sender to judge by the carefully scrawled return address on the paper's blank side. The letter's last line queried Cole whether or not he was up for something

soon. There was a phone number that Cole could call if he wanted some kind of action. He didn't say what exactly. But it did mention that there was the possibility of obtaining a gun.

If he wanted a gun Cole Stewart could get them both a gun easily. In this day and age, even in liberal California, there was nothing to the purchase.

"Shit's there for the taking," the short letter advised Cole at some point of the need for a firearm and reiterated that Cole should call the number forthwith. World's your oyster and all that, if you have the guts. But the letter's writer wasn't so poetic to actually use this turn of phrase.

Back in the townhouse the lights were turned off and the TV in the bedroom turned up on maximum volume to the aforementioned CNN.

"Neighbors gonna be pissed about that," Cole said to Karen at a volume low enough that he knew she wouldn't be able to hear let alone respond to. Fuck if he cared about the neighbors, let alone Karen just at this moment. But, if she was eating her microwave pizzas in bed again, he was going to be pissed. There was no excuse for that level of obnoxiousness. And if she was angry at him for something he had done she should tell it to his face rather than just trying to make him mad.

Banging noises slightly muffled emerged from behind the bedroom door which made Cole assume Karen was in possession of a hammer and was doing damage to a bit of his personal property.

"Bitch, you got another thing coming about that," he said to himself quietly and tried the door which he had assumed would have been locked from the inside.

Opening it, a bloodied Jesus Christ was beheld standing on the other side.

"*Pater nostrum, pater vengeance*," Jesus Christ said to Cole through a row of rotten teeth and leaned forward to him. Just then he was showing off his wounds unto Cole. And even for the savior of the world he had this demented look in his eyes. He was not all there really if such a thing could be said about the Son of God. He was not somebody one would want to meet at the moment in a dark alley.

# Chapter Five → (November, 1996)

As filtered through the demented perceptions of one of his biggest earth-bound fans, Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, was in fact markedly devoid of glad tidings these days. He was dilatory and shambling rather, guilt-ridden over perceived failures of his ministry and seeming to desire nothing more than the present pleasure of escape from such cloistered circumstances that he found himself in at the moment.

"Lamb," Jesus Christ said unto Ti and Do, the former Marshall Applewhite, having been split in two by a nasty bout of schizophrenia, thirty seconds after he was asked in that wide-eyed mincing way of theirs what was on the menu at the Last Supper.

After Jesus said this he grabbed briefly at the tasseled hem of his sheer silk gown and ran it through his fingers absent-mindedly. He had just made a joke at Ti and Do's expense and, Jesus being Jesus, as soon as he had, he seemed to be guilty about having done it. One look at Ti and Do told you that they were at the end of their collective rope obviously and shouldn't be fucked with unnecessarily. Because, to judge by the expression on his face after he said it, Ti and Do lacked the gene that enabled a sense of humor. Or maybe they had a sense of humor but had lost it at some point in their lives due to circumstances beyond their control.

When Ti and Do stared at you nowadays they stared at you for minutes on end in that famous unblinking way of theirs that admitted no ability to be anything other than completely earnest with you at all times. As if their entire unconscious had been sandblasted away over the span of many difficult years and now only a hollow exterior remained.

When he stared at you in this manner it was not intended to be challenging, not even slightly. Rather he stared because over time he had become convinced about the primacy of his own experience so much so that no ironic gesture—a coy glancing away, for example, or even a downcast expression that would have suggested he had more on his mind than what he was saying to somebody at a given instant—was allowed when in the midst of a conversation. Ti and Do never joked, which was to say that he neither gave nor received bits of humor ever. He took everything at a literal level rather which must surely be a sign of a profoundly desperate man. But this meant also that even his holy visions were bound to feel uncomfortable in his presence from time to time. Humor made the often difficult feat of communication easier for everybody in society which was why it was so prevalent and prized. Ti and Do didn't get on well with ordinary folks because of this quirk in his personality. A being like the Lord Jesus Christ on the other hand, in Ti and Do's reckoning, was, despite his T.E.L.A.H bona fides, the salt of the earth. And more or less non-psychotic types like this Jesus Christ could be imagined to grow nervous in the presence of Marshall's unblinking gaze and lash out. It was an entirely understandable phenomenon, if a bit disappointing if you considered who it was lashing out just then.

Jesus Christ, at least in this incarnation, at least in this latest earthly visitation, was demonstrating every effect of impatience while in Marshall Applewhite's glaring presence. This was an absurdity and maybe a tautology but probably to be expected too.

"You need to see through Lucifer's lies," Jesus told Ti and Do curtly when it was obviously time for him to talk. The nervous habit of grabbing his gown's hem had come upon him all at once seemingly and he might have been at a loss to explain how come this was. Suddenly Jesus didn't

seem to belong in this place at all. Being the Son of the Chief of Chiefs all this was truly incongruous. The room that he was in at the moment (if that's what it could be called) was windowless made of some-transparent fungible material that if touched might well have admitted the presence of a pulsing of blood underneath it and thus reveal itself as an internal organ's interior lining. It was not a place one would care to build a shelter in, or even remain a few seconds longer than one had to in order to accomplish the set of tasks that led one to such a place to begin with. Its shape seemed specifically designed to instill paranoia in an inhabitant with his curving walls and the mysterious fluids that would emerge from its rounded corners every so often that suggested a type of gastric process was on-going just out of view. Maybe this was the waiting room of a specific Dantean circle of hell, and they were both being readied for digestion nearly in the belly of some unspeakable beast. Stranger things had happened over the millennia to Jesus. He was the last hope of so many hopeless men and lunatics after all. He was always finding himself in a pinch because of all this fanboy adulation. He was always being asked to bridge the gap between faith and perception at a moment's notice and without real justification from those who asked.

In fact one of Lucifer's lies was on-going already in Jesus' already stated opinion. Ti and Do the requestors of deliverance had shown no propensity to see through it.

"You've failed but won't admit it to yourself," Jesus had told Marshall at the outset of this latest visitation with him. He had been summoned here of course from a place somewhere between complete oblivion and collective memory which was at the nexus of the imaginations of so many desperate people that longed for his return and thus created a type of razor thin reality through the force of their conviction. But this imaginative longing when filtered through the mind of a genuine paranoid schizophrenic like Marshall Applewhite became an actual person, possessing physical parameters and a consciousness, if consciousness could be defined as a demonstrated ability to interact in complex ways with the external world in which it swam. Smallpox viruses are possessors of a primitive consciousness in this regard. Unicorns have one too, if you

were crazy enough to visualize a unicorn standing in front of you right at you with sad blue unicorn eyes, answering your questions curtly in a Scottish burr.

Jesus Christ, this Jesus Christ that is, knew of what he spoke when he spoke about the inability to detect Lucifer's lies. He himself, you see, was a part of the lie. He would not claim anything to the contrary if asked directly. But Ti and Do never asked Jesus directly about anything. He was long gone down the rat hole of his own madness by this point to question its hallucinatory effects even slightly. His whole self-identity was wrapped up in his own divine nature. He was the One and new he was the One in large part because he was talking to the Lord Jesus Christ at the moment as plainly as a normal person would on a particularly lonely day speak to his or her Siamese cat. Ti and Do's conversations invariably were one way but that was not to say that they weren't real. Often Jesus, like the Siamese cat when hearing a stream of non-sense verbiage directed at it, would protest crankily attempting to elicit a more physical pleasing action from the speechifier. Of course such protests were bound to failure because even full bore lunatics at a certain level realized that their hallucinations lacked a certain degree of authority in the objective world. They saw them as real, but real more at the level of cats than people. They saw them as more or less dump objects, that despite their superficial charisma, one was free to do with what one chose. Even Jesus' advice would fall on deaf ears with Ti and Do who didn't seem to be in need of advice so much as validation for already independently formed plans. There was something about this Jesus that missed the mark completely. That revealed not a weakness but an avid disinterest in the immediate proceedings. He was the Light of the World truly. But in Ti and Do's eyes he was less than a trusted advisor. He seemed to lack real passion for his job. He seemed to be some sort of wind up doll of forgiveness, just going through the motions in a pre-programmed way.

This hesitant manner of his was noticed by Ti and Do readily and assumed by him as one more sign absent of wonder foretelling the great Recycling to come.

"We are all looking for a particular date," Ti and Do told Christ with a slight sort of impatience riding underneath his

Texas twang. It was an obvious thing that he was asking for from a T.E.L.A.H. leader. He didn't understand why it hadn't been communicated to him straight off then repeated several times as if for emphasis.

So much work to do up until that point of course, human plants to prepare, goodbye notes to write, and Phenobarbital to purchase en masse. Always in his mind Ti and Do was thinking that there should be enough for a hundred though at present the Heaven's Gate Society numbered just forty-eight tithing members with another thirty-six "sympathizers" so-called, correspondents with Ti and Do or members who had never been able to make a full commitment to the disciplines involved in becoming a human host for an evolved being and thus survive the end of the world intact. In such situations and at all times one was required to have faith but, distressingly, Ti and Do's faith were wavering steadily. Their lives' work seemed to be falling apart by the hour. Every day there seemed a new crisis to deal with. They were convinced Do had cancer of the stomach and intestines, the kidneys, the liver, the brain, the testes, the lungs, the pancreas, and the anus.

All these disasters taken collectively could of course be seen positively in the sense that they could be taken as confirmation of an imminent Recycling. But individually they weighed on him mightily and gnawed at the certainly he usually felt that everything he had done for humanity up until this point was inspired by those loving evolved extraterrestrials such as the Lord Jesus Christ who would like to take as many plants with them as possible from the garden before the earth was turned over and it was time to start again.

"You who have done so much for us must do something else for us if we are to continue to call you Christ," Ti and Do told Jesus using words that only months before he would have been shocked to have heard coming from his own mouth. This by itself would have been confirmation of the presence of one of Lucifer's lies as far as he was concerned, a pernicious weed wrapped around the beautiful flower of his soul. Usually such removal had been accomplished through various means of what Ti and Do's long time now deceased partner Peep termed re-programming, a simple attempt made to reorient spiritual desires into its former

robust healthy state. Left to their own devices, Peep was sure most human plants would flourish independent of any special attention paid to them. But over the past few months Marshall Applewhite began to doubt that this was the case. He had come to see many of his followers as inextricably flawed and suspected the Next Level beings whose exalted state that all aspired to as disturbingly indifferent to the shortcomings of those that had been created supposedly in their own image. He kept on petitioning them for specific answers about the what-and-when of global apocalypse but kept on being disappointed by what he heard. They didn't seem to care either about the fate of the plants in the garden they created generally or of their chosen mouthpiece Marshall Applewhite in particular. For going on twenty years Marshall had been their indefatigable servant but no reward or even a genial pat on the back had ever been forthcoming from them. Like Lucifer himself they seemed to have grown cynical about their own mission statement here in the Garden Earth which was to cultivate and harvest as many human plants as possible prior to the Garden Earth's Recycling. Through Ti and Do's and Peep's enormous efforts forty-three healthy plants were ready for bonding and transportation unto the higher realm right at this moment. This higher realm, needless to say, was not a planet nor a moon around a planet, but a discreet dimension of space-time disconnected from this universe and accessible only by creatures who had migrated from that dimension unto this universe in the first place. That was to say, un-evolved creatures of the "flat universe" (Ti and Do's term of art over the past eighteen months) would need to meld with either an evolved creature or Next Level (the evolved level above human) in order to make the trip. It was a physical law, not something that even the Next Level commander (or "Chief of Chiefs") could override. The Next Levels had come to garden earth on many former occasions in order to plant and nurture human life. Eventually the plants would mature and it would be time to Recycle. Just like Christ before him, it was Ti and Do's task to ready so many human plants for the harvest. His own walk-in Next Level had told him this in no uncertain terms and on many occasions. But just recently he had been receiving mixed

messages. Most significantly there was no endpoint in sight. A clear signal had not been given either from Captain Christ or his superior officer, the nameless Commodore, who was this dimension's ultimate life form. Twenty years in the wilderness so to speak spent gardening and there was no clear communication to him yet about how the harvest would commence. It was all in the hands of the Next Levels at this point but they didn't seem in the mood to communicate their desires to Ti and Do, their earthly representative, who would be most in need about how to proceed from this point forward. So he was here presently with several dozen aspirants on the outskirts of San Diego waiting for a sign. It was good to see Captain Christ again but he presently seemed just as befuddled as Ti and Do. As if Jesus were the suppliant and Ti and Do the repository of an elevated knowledge. He didn't understand the cause of this shabby performance. Jesus seemed in the midst of playing some sort of game with Ti and Do which was appalling to Ti and Do given the moment's urgency and the fact that objectively he was fading out from this vulgar existence quickly as he might.

If the Captain didn't believe Ti and Do's present claim that he was afflicted with cancer, he could oblige him right then with an immediate inspection of his physical shell.

"I felt the first tumor a month ago while cleaning up from an evacuation," Ti and Do told Jesus Christ after loosening the drawstring on his drawstring pants sufficiently that his rectum could be sufficiently displayed. Plenty limber for a man of his advanced years, Marshall Applewhite was now on his back with his chin halfway down his sternum and his hands on his butt cheeks pulling on them to expose the circular brown treasure at their center. A medical professional of likely any level could quickly identify the object to which Ti and Do was referring at the moment as a hemorrhoid, harmless as any log-dwelling snail. But this sort of trained rational observer was utterly missing from the room at the minute. Jesus Christ for his part stared at this imperfection politely. He seemed on the point of standing up and attempting to leave. This seemed the last indignation that he could bear from this lunatic. But he was not real enough to act independently. So he had to sit there and listen.

The fatigue that Ti and Do now experienced came upon him in waves, sometimes rendering him incapacitated for several days consecutively. The food he forced on himself of late was tasteless to Ti and Do as if made of equal parts damp clay, water and refined flour. His stools reeked of ammonia nitrate and his breath reeked of decaying vegetation. And the anxiety when it descended on him would remain sometimes for weeks at a time.

It was cancer according to Ti and Do, as everything that happened to him must mean something deep and abiding, as opposed to something incidental and merely unfortunate. He wasn't exhausted and merely unwell presently, therefore, but stricken with a terminal illness. There were no shallow temporary declines in the life history of somebody identified as the One. Cancer in all its varieties held significant spiritual connotation but hemorrhoids and nervous exhaustion (not to mention paranoid schizophrenia) held very little. Like all things that he considered since the summer of 1975 when the visions started he considered them in a very shallow yet in a very grandiose manner. And once he decided something was the case, there was no retreat from his initial hypothesis. Even before his lunacy came upon him Marshall Applewhite was never what might be called an analytical sort. Very right-brain oriented, much to his own detriment. He never really thought things through properly.

His larger point, however, was that his time on earth was limited and the Next Levels were taking their own sweet time with whatever plans they had for he and his followers.

"I'm a bit worried about us all meeting our respective obligations," he told Jesus Christ who of late had placed his head in his hands and was staring at the strange room's floor. Well, look, enormous events such as this Great Recycling happened on their own time and there was little that could be done about it. Even the Captain's immediate superior, the Lord Chief of Chiefs Almighty, couldn't force the moment to its crisis in any direct way. And so there was also the inevitable consideration that maybe Ti and Do collectively or individually weren't the center of all things in humanity's conclusion. It was quite possible that he was a single implement amongst many on the planet at the

moment and as such he was wholly expendable. It was quite possible that they were not even unsympathetic to his dilemma at the moment seeing him as one more plant merely amongst billions.

Over the course of so many sleepless nights, Ti and Do thought about this eventuality and what he would say and do once confronted with the evidence of his own unimportance from an unimpeachable source.

“I am an evolved being just like you,” he said to Captain Christ with more than a touch of annoyance in his voice. Over time and during his long dark night of the soul Ti and Do had come to see Jesus more as a senior colleague than any sort of divine figure to be worshipped. Perhaps it was a case of his ego being in supreme overdrive, but based on the best available evidence that he had thus far been given about his own status it was not an inaccurate statement. So all the more annoying that Jesus was barely making eye contact with him let alone answering any of Ti and Do’s questions in a forthright manner. So it was that a new tendril acting as vanguard of a creeping jungle of paranoia made itself known to Ti and Do at that moment. He began to suspect that there had been some sort of Lucifercian infiltration of the Next Level high command. He began to suspect that even Christ himself might have been compromised in some way and was not to be trusted. He could read Jesus’s shifty body language just then and intuit that this was so. He could tell a secret was in the midst of being concealed from ordinary view. He could tell necessary information was being withheld from him and he was furious that this was so.

In reality Jesus Christ appeared to Marshall Applewhite presently in this wilted state because of his own depression, which worked against (well, slightly) the schizophrenia’s hyperactive fantasy making effects. It turned all the visions gray and brown by turns prior to them disappearing entirely. It was a temporary effect, surely, but madmen like Ti and Do were notoriously inept at forecasting their future mental state. They seemed to float in an ever expanding present rather and assume a persistent state of being which an ordinary level of reflection would tell you was completely unlikely if not impossible given the mind’s protean nature. Even though

so much change had already happened to him during these years, he categorically rejected the notion that real change was possible. Marshall Applewhite was eternal in his own estimation, Chief of Chiefs-like in his inability to suffer even an up quark's worth of differentiation between one dimensional incarnation and another. And this dolorous admission tended to feed into and amplify his depressed and anxious state mightily. With him everything was readily apparent, every perception was certifiably true and, therefore, able to be disremembered as soon as it was discovered. Devoid of mystery, the world took on a very rote and dull sheen quickly. It's a fate various aspirants of higher consciousness needed to be wary of before they embarked on their journey. Enlightenment for so many was a true bore. For so many more it was a mere disappointment and they were belter off being deaf, dumb, and blind vis-à-vis the eternal if only because their imaginations could far outstrip in grandeur what their perceptions would report to them later on.

Somebody like Ti and Do, however, was a truth addict long before even he became mentally ill. He demanded to know everything about the world. But he could know nothing of it besides his own hallucinations. It was a type of ironic hell that he existed in. He was as a result the least self-satisfied god-man that ever existed on the planet. He felt his divinity in every crevice of his being but was miserable because of it. Only in the past few months had he began to wonder how this could be. He didn't see his own fate as intertwined with Christ's. There was neither desire nor motive within him to mount the cross.

He conceived himself as above all things a survivor, but somehow this self-concept was at odds with the silence emanating of late from his would-be rescuers.

"We're not like you," Ti and Do told Jesus and shook their head. They had said this in a way that made them feel a physical cue was required of them to drive the point home. But Jesus wasn't responsive to their provocations, which only reinforced the notion that Do and Ti needed to place increased emphasis on the point. This conversation up until now had been distressingly one way. They felt any sort of learning that would take place would proceed

student to teacher, not the other way around as it might have been proper to expect.

Staring out at this hermetic room with rheumy eyes that admitted no feeling except a general fatigue (which strictly speaking was a loss of feeling. Therefore, no emotion at all.), Jesus seemed momentarily at a loss for words.

“That which you seek,” he said to Ti and Do, “is out there in the world to be observed. You merely need to be patient and perceptive,” Jesus said. He said that there was no need to seek an audience with Next Level leaders to discover what in fact needed to be done. Everything had been thought of, every eventuality had been considered and militated against ably. There was nothing that had been left out, there was nothing being held back from Ti and Do as if there was some rift between Next Levels on the ground and those in the sky. In fact nothing could be further from the truth. Everything, Jesus said, was going according to Hoyle. Computers the size of galaxies had crunched the numbers several millennia ahead of time. Every atom in this scenario was numbered, every thought of every person on the planet had been anticipated in advance and cataloged and entered into the scenario. This all happened ten of thousands of years ago, needless to say, and thus far there had been no need for even a single correction in a book equivalent to a million Library of Congress contents.

That which Marshall Applewhite sought, Jesus Christ assured him, was entirely self-evident and could be discovered by him at any time. The clues were plentiful enough and the evening news broadcasts, though generally empty of content, held enough data to be able to aid him in this endeavor. There was little need for spelling it out for him, Jesus went on to say. Just needed to still his thoughts slightly and let the truth wash over him like the famous living ocean on the planet Mtyrntx in the Andromeda galaxy wherein dwelt creatures in possessions of secondary brains on the outside of their bodies and their genitals on the inside of their bodies. Which allowed them to go fuck themselves at any point in their long and pointless existence. And nobody would be the wiser that they were doing so.

Speaking of such masturbatory activity, Jesus Christ suddenly regained his passion for communication.

There was, he said, growing concern amongst the TELAHan command structure about the physical status of many of Ti and Do's human plants this close to Recycling and their stewardship of this project in general.

"Six castrations only thus far according to our records," Jesus told Ti and Do, "including yourself. There have been no cliterectomies thus far that we are aware. And only one hysterectomy. There has been no attempt, furthermore, made on your part to raise these numbers. It doesn't seem at least on this issue that you are a team player. It doesn't seem at least in this issue that you have your students' best interests at hand."

"It's a measure of commitment more than anything else," Jesus said, "and a measure of how far we all have to go. The physical body Ti, as you know, must be made ready to receive a Next Level spirit. It must be purified beforehand if the grafting is to be successful."

The genitalia of both sexes were by definition according to Jesus Christ evidence of earth bound corruption and Lucifer's influence in this dimensional realm. Also, there was the issue of dedication to the cause that couldn't help being identified by potential away team members' refusal to be gelded. Maybe they weren't taking this as seriously as Ti and Do after a fashion. Maybe in the final analysis they weren't ready to become a hospitable host for a Next Level consciousness who, like it or not, had specific spiritual needs for its dwelling place even for a short period of time.

With this all in mind so the question was often asked by away team candidates why assorted cocks and clits had been designed at all if they were grounds for rejection in so many cases by itself.

"For thousands of years reproduction amongst plants was necessary," Captain Christ told Ti and Do repeating ver batim the same speech on the subject that Marshall used whenever the subject of voluntary castration came up. Marshall had a PowerPoint presentation at the ready just for this occasion. He had a series of handmade diagrams about what they would do and how they would do it at the ready if anybody should care to ask.

It wasn't exactly what you might call a powerful recruiting tool was the reason by and large the castration option had been de-emphasized by Do and Ti to the point of non-existence over the past few years.

"I had a quota to meet," they said to Jesus concerning the reason that over time this hygienic process had become a more or less unspoken of aspect of membership in Heaven's Gate. Even the most receptive of human plants likely were aghast at having their balls cut off and for many it would prove a deal breaker straight off. Marshall Applewhite during his PowerPoint chat would go over the process and explain at length why it was necessary. But for many it was like a bit of cold water in the face. They recoiled from the notion let alone the notion's realization. And if they didn't recoil the outsiders to whom the process was explained recoiled and used it as grounds to try and forcibly remove their loved ones from the Away Team. As if they weren't all of sound mind and could do with their bodies as they wished.

They had a surgeon on retainer in glorious old Mexico who had volunteered to take care of a half dozen of the loco Americanos at one time.

"*Sólo un recorte , recorte y luego nada*," said the surgeon, who spoke not a word on English, to Ti and Do on the first occasion of their meeting in 1992. According to him, it was the exact same practice that he administered while as a veterinarian's assistant in Guadalajara. Nothing to it if one was careful enough to avoid nicking an artery. Even then there were procedures that he had learned for sewing an artery shut later. He had more or less modern surgical quarters in downtown Tijuana. He was in the midst of hiring an anesthesiologist even now.

Why the gringos were getting this procedure done to them, the surgeon didn't know though he made them pay in advance owing to his suspicion that they were all escapees of some impossibly posh lunatic facility up north.

"*Es necesario que me traiga más de sus locos, señor*," the surgeon had told Ti and Do on the occasion of their last face-to-face nine months before. He had been promised a flood of work for his services but thus far received merely a trickle. For what he charged there was no objection that Ti and Do could raise about them not being able to afford the

procedure en masse. They all looked alike to him these ghost-faced Americans, the boys indistinct from the girls. They indeed seemed nothing more than ghosts to him. And thus they shouldn't be looked at or spoken to or even looked at directly unless one was operating on them forthwith.

It was not a practice, frankly, that even a doctor in Tijuana would want to advertise for except in the most confidential of ways imaginable.

"*Dejar de permitir que todo el mundo abajo*," the surgeon had told Marshall on the occasion of their last meeting. He had considered charging him for the overhead involving the maintenance for a four table operating room. Marshall had come on to the surgeon like the second coming of Christ, predicting five thousand men and women would wish to have their lives irrevocably damaged. It never happened and of course it was obvious to see why. There were few that were as dangerously delusional as the man standing right before him at the moment. People had their bad moments but they usually would snap out of it forthwith. When they made Marshall Applewhite, however, they broke the motherfucking mold. And thank the Lord for that. But the surgeon meant it when he told him to stop letting everybody down.

In pointing all this out, Jesus Christ was in Ti and Do's view taking a not so subtle poke at their competency as an inter-dimensional shepherd. But there again was his prerogative as a man who had died for all our sins and in a spectacular way.

"Thank you for all your constructive criticism," Marshall Applewhite told Jesus Christ and closed his eyes slowly. Then he kept them closed for the longest time. He had learned by trial and error over the decades that this was how one caused the visions to extinguish themselves, to sit quietly by oneself with one's eyes closed for an extended period of time and wait. In this manner a calmness would eventually descend on the immediate surroundings in due course. And soon everything outside would become just like it was before. He didn't think there was any need by this point to worry about what the outcome of this process would be. He assumed he had control of the visions. He assumed that in a way all Next Levels were subordinate to

him in this life because he was the only true gardener left. So they came and went more or less based on his whims. And he didn't find this to be remotely strange at all.

With his eyes closed he began to hum an aria dimly recalled from his days as a music teacher in Houston. This was the famous *Largo al Factotum* from *The Barber of Seville*:

*Rasori e pettini*
*lancette e forbici,*
*al mio comando*
*tutto qui sta.*
*V'è la risorsa,*
*poi, del mestiere*
*colla donnetta... col cavaliere...*

Marshall, alas, was an alto and thus never received the choice roles. But because of his infrequent bows as a passerby or the Barber's friend Luigi he could recall every word of every opera with astonishing clarity. He lacked this sort of sharp acuity for all other matters in this life but somehow he knew every note of every opera in which he had ever performed. And his favorites were written by Wagner. No others had the same sense of transcendent majesty and the portrayal of suffering of great men at the hands of lesser lights. No others seemed to point to the notion that all of human history might in fact be a prelude to the activities of a single individual in a single time. All others seemed blind to the possibility that a single person given the context might be more important that ten billion others if they were deprived of certain knowledge or even a bit of genetic pre-disposition. Marshall was Tristian, Siegfried, and Bayreuth rolled into one. It never occurred to him that these Wagner epics were a template for a deeply unwholesome political narrative. His mind didn't work that way probably wherein causes and effects were as obvious as all that.

He needed to communicate to someone about all that he had perceived in the past few minutes. But his status as the most important human being of all time worked against such intimate sharing of feelings with anybody real. It was lonely at the top, so to speak. And his partner, Beep, the

former Ti, the former Dottie Nettles, had succumbed to cancer herself long ago. This isolation likely only fed into Ti and Do's paranoia, and enhanced that amount which was already there. But, then again, a paranoid schizophrenic who was utterly devoid of a support system was exempt from any sort of psychological designation along these lines. He had the need to declaim nevertheless, crazy or not. That was all that motivated him at the moment. He was selfless in his the cocoon of his madness. He was absolutely convinced about what he was saying and therefore had abandoned any sort of self-consciousness for good.

Painted on vines of ivy clung to the exterior walls of this latest residence, the Away Team found themselves in the winter of 1996, recalling for Ti and Do a broken camera lens. Or even better an enormous monster's egg in the midst of being hatched, just before the monster that dwelt inside was revealed.

"We are not ourselves when we are by ourselves," Ti and Do said to Smmody, the former Ernesto Hernandez, who Ti and Do found sitting in one corner of this enormous house's living room reading a text book on computer repair. As with all new members, Smmody was wearing an 80s-style mullet which, along with the loose fitting shirt and khaki trousers he was issued at the conclusion of his welcoming ceremony, worked against a definite identification of his gender. Because of course we in our natural state are wholly sexless creatures just like Adam and Eve were before the Fall. We were never ourselves when we were only by ourselves. Sexual identity invariably led to sexual desires which led to sexual acts of a nature too uncultivated to ever be allowable for a Next Level host. That was where the weeds of Lucifer infiltrated most deeply, just at groin level. One was required to nip it all in the bud so to speak. There was likely no gender in the Next Level world. But in the present world when unevolved humans were required to reproduce, sexuality was the easiest lever to pull. It was too much of a burden finally to leave behind totally for so many.

Ti and Do had grown increasingly suspicious of Smmody for some reason. And his present seclusion had set off warning bells immediately.

“I have spoken to the high council about you,” Ti and Do told Smmody recalling for him an imaginary conversation he had with a non-existent Next Level body. Now, anybody familiar enough with the practices of the Next Level knew enough to realize that any concept of a high council was completely preposterous. Everything in that world existed hierarchically and without any political motive. Because politics suggested a level of disagreement or strife which was utter anathema to every Old Member. For somebody whose Next Level mind was completely developed, such knowledge was instinctive. Thus, all the more to worry about Smmody. He didn’t seem to know the simplest thing about the Away Team. He didn’t seem to be someone with an ounce of Old Wisdom to him.

Smmody was one of Lucifer’s spies, according to Do and Ti. He was sent to destroy the group from within. But they needed definitive proof or at least proof before he acted on the assumption.

“We miss you when you are not near to us in absolutely every way,” one of the pair said to Smmody and watched as the book closed. *Earn Your A+ Certification in Computer Repair in Twenty One Days* was the book’s title. Immediately Marshall thought of it as a Luciferian code. The number twenty one if he remembered his Biblical studies back in Texas held some sort of meaning. Nothing like 666, but he was sure the number twenty-one was related to the Book of Revelations. And maybe its cover had been designed entirely with him in mind. Tired and disappointed from his latest meeting with the very Old Member, he was having trouble locating the exact spot in his brain where the information resided. Perhaps this meant amongst other things that his brain cancer had metastasized, too. He would need to sort out exactly what was being attempted here at some future point. Perhaps Smmody was Lucifer himself in human guise. He couldn’t believe this was the case but you needed to rifle through the possibilities. Or perhaps it was all a misdirection intended to distract him from the real threat in the Away Team that even now was sneaking up him invisibly.

They were children of light. They were all to an extraordinary degree (and you can ask anybody about this if you doubt), devoid of violent tendencies. But so the

thought suddenly occurred to both Do and Ti more or less at the same time that instilling some discipline in the ranks from time to time was hardly disallowed and probably a very good idea. One didn't need to throw a punch after all to be tough. And one didn't need to humiliate a younger member to demonstrate that at least on this plane one was of a superior rank.

Captain Kirk after all had no problem giving direct orders to both Scotty and Spock whenever the circumstances dictated that he should. It wasn't a matter of being mean to anybody. But a leader was required to be somewhat aloof always from his subordinates if only for their own good. This was called the chain of command. And it was equally valid in the evolved realm as well as this one.

He could see himself throwing Smmody out of the group at some point with this in mind. For now, he would be content to rifle through his belongings when he was away and recruit a younger member as a spy. Because especially at this dark moment he needed to be absolutely sure about the direction in which the group was headed. He didn't know when this dark period would end. Maybe they were all consigned to this state of affairs for all time. He didn't know what his responsibilities would be if that was the case.

Smmody had a built-in excuse for being in possession of the manual. This was that part of his Away Team training was in computer repair.

"Your job is something that you should take seriously," Do and Ti said unto Smmody, seeming to contradict what he had been telling him only thirty seconds before. "But not at the price of your immortal soul."

For the life of him just then he couldn't recall Smmody's name even though they had been the one who had given it to him in an on-boarding ceremony three weeks before. This, too, it seemed, was proof positive that there was cancer now in his brain. He assumed he had at best another three weeks left to live. They assumed it was only their exalted, extra-human status that had kept him upright and functional presently. They were forced to confront the dark truth that perhaps Do's soul would not be amongst those spirited away. Like Commander Christ, or at least his

physical shell, he would be martyred for the cause. It didn't seem hardly fair to those who had thought about things in such vulgar terms. It didn't seem like just desserts for a being who had given his all for so long and received nothing but terminal illness in recompense for his suffering.

Smmody, the former Ernesto Hernandez, for his part, seemed to not know what his teacher was on about at all.

"I saw on TV," he said to Do and Ti, "that they've made arrests in the subway gas attack. Well, I didn't watch the news but somebody at work did," he said. "I saw on the news that there is another false prophet neutralized. He talked about himself as the Son of God. But then he acted like Lucifer."

Do and Ti nodded once this was said, not knowing what was being alluded to at all but not wishing to admit that this was the case. They were, in a particular recounting of their nature, omniscient creatures at least to the degree that nobody within the group could say or claim anything that he wouldn't have anticipated in advance. But of late it was as if they were speaking another language entirely to him. Often he felt he had lost control of them. Often he was certain that they all were plotting behind his back and he would need to eliminate them and start afresh entirely.

Look, you could call Heaven's Gate a cult if you wished but, realize, their entire belief system was based on science. Weedy people who were ready for recycling held all sort of beliefs that had never been examined properly either by them or by those from whom the belief had been received. In this manner they were no better than donkeys or end tables. They were brainless objects whose souls were so underdeveloped as to not seem truly there from the start. Once on the mother ship being ferried away to the inter-dimensional vortex, there would be no tears shed over their loss. So it was Do and Ti's belief that this was what Smmody was getting at. He wasn't stating it clearly enough, however, as would have befitted a true Away Team member. He was including all sort of extraneous matters into his speech such as another group of humans entirely whose fate Do and Ti attached very little meaning to. They didn't understand why anybody (he or she or it) would be interested in any worldly event they saw on the evening news. They didn't understand why anybody should not

focus utterly on the immediate task at hand which was surviving the recycling. Everything else was utter trivia. He didn't understand why a normal person wouldn't believe that this was so.

The false prophet that Smmody alluded to was Ayum Arango who had been lately caught by Japanese authorities and made to stand trial for his crimes.

"They don't understand the urgency of the hour," Do and Ti said unto Smmody though he assumed he was talking about the affairs in Japan. At his low point, which was now, Do and Ti gave up on this world and the people in it completely. He had of late begun to formulate a plan of escape only for himself when and if the moment became too unbearable for him. He found it odious that he should have to be a martyr for those whom he had no respect for at all. He had no intention of going through with it regardless if that was the memberships' plan for him. They could try to regrow their genitals for all he cared at this point. He tried to have love for this world into which he was thrust but found it an impossible task. Marshall Applewhite through his own earth-bound internment had been taught over the span of decades to hate them all. The moment of ecstasy when he was whisked away would be invariably mingled with the pleasure of watching their demise. He hated them all deeply. He could deny all he want that this was so but at moments like these his true feelings were recalled. And maybe it was through the agency of such tribulations that Jesus Christ grew to hate them all, too.

Over the twenty years or so many similar tribulations had occurred within the group including the horrific death of Heaven's Gate co-founder, Peep. Do and Ti understood that on earth it was the nature of things for great men to be made to suffer. They understood, furthermore, that even advanced beings had limitations to their patience and the resources that they would provide in helping those that seemed to have no interest whatsoever in helping themselves.

"You think of yourself as a vase with two balloons inside it," they heard themselves say to a prospective audience minutes later via the series of video tapes they had recorded in 1988 for mass distribution when it happened

the group had come into some money. They would from time to time make journeys to college campuses where the tapes would be given away. They would hand them to complete strangers in exchange for their mailing address. Very soon they would pay whoever it was a call. They had their legs underneath them in those days regarding their recruiting efforts. They didn't see why in particular over ten thousand plants could not be harvested prior to Recycling. They didn't see it as any sort insurmountable problem.

Presently in this enormous house's great room members sat in their pre-assigned workgroups performing visualizing exercises. This they had been told was the quickest way to drain the animal consciousness so that the soul could flourish. They needed to think of themselves departing their bodies exactly in the way that would occur when it was time to make the jump. They needed to progressively separate themselves from their bodies. I n doing so they would eventually see the body for the rotting, degraded husk that it was. It was an obvious connection to make. They needed to make that connection explicitly before any further growth could take place.

When they came home from their jobs that they kept strictly as a training exercise in the providing of service to others, all HG members were assigned a ninety minute visualizing exercise prior to the partaking of food at the long table that had been set up on the great room's edge stretching into the kitchen.

"You need to realize everything you have been told up until this very moment is exactly false," Do and Ti said in unison while staring into the video camera. Where they had filmed this it was hard for them now to say but they assumed it was somewhere in New Mexico, their former home. They didn't believe especially in the ability of pre-cognition which was the ability to foretell the future but they were certain at this very moment staring into the camera they were aware of the other Do and Ti staring back at them across the span of twenty years. Maybe for every act of pre-cognition there was a corresponding act of amnesia which was the reason he could not remember now. But suddenly they were sure it had occurred. They had broken through whatever mental wall had been placed

around them in order to forestall this very realization. This in itself was a breakthrough as far as they were concerned. A barrier had been placed around them but the barrier had been overcome. And if this wall could be forded, they assumed together, so too could any other sort of obstacle. So it was in this ingrown manner that a spark hope of was rekindled in Marshall Applewhite. He didn't need much if anything from the outside world. He was completely inward looking. The schizophrenia acted upon his psyche like consecutive layers of blubber that protected against icy seas. It had kept Marshall warm through many tribulations thus far.

He was always finding it of use as a spiritual divining rod, to find meaning in otherwise empty places and thus sustain himself temporarily.

Indeed, everything everybody had been told prior to joining Heaven's Gate had been false. Just like everybody else Marshall Applewhite was ignorant of the truth prior to his great awakening in the spring of 1975.

"I was a lost lamb prior to receiving the Sacred Word," he said to himself in what had come to be called real time in this increasingly digitized culture over the past few years. In another type of existence of the sort of which evolved beings have access to just like microfiche at a library, he might well have been a Presbyterian minister in the type of church he attended regularly in Texas. And if this occurred the truth of the universe likely would have lain undiscovered for all humans in this era just like an enormous structure under a sprinkling of snow. He could have very well lived out his life ignorant of his fate just like so many billions of others in the present day. Just as long as the end came quickly (and he assumed it would) it wouldn't have been the worst of fates, he supposed. He could have married successfully in this instance and suppressed his perverted desires. His lust for young boys he always assumed was satanic in nature. It was a spiritual problem. Thus it could be overcome through force of will just like one could overcome any other fleshly desire entirely through the humble act of prayer.

At heart Marshall was a Christian just like his dearly departed mother. Just like her, he saw God and the Devil at work in all things. Well, perhaps in the next level all the

angelic fantasies and cloud cities of the traditional Christian interpretation would prove themselves to be prophetic. Perhaps reality in the next level was fungible like the texture of a dream and could appear in whatever guise one desired that it should appear in. Deeply evolved creatures were empty of desire entirely and saw things as they were. It was the sort of paradox, he assumed, that would resolve itself once the Next Step was taken. Within a very few seconds of being carried away he imagined it would all come clear. He imagined it would be like a falling away of scales. He imagined that once it occurred it would seem so clear that he couldn't conceptualize it having once been confusing for him even slightly.

At exactly nine pm Do and Ti started their daily talk that had come to be known as his Captain's log talking about this very phenomenon.

"We can only have faith in that which will be," they said to the younger members who as per team procedure were sitting in neatly ordered rows on the room's bare floor with their hands underneath them so as to forestall the possibility that they would use them at any point for no good (*idle hands...*). But being a scientific movement foremost, this notion proved particularly hard to reconcile with Heaven's Gate's overall belief set. They saw themselves as above religion so to speak in absolutely every way. They didn't think that they needed to have faith in anything any longer if only because the truth by definition was self-evident and did not have to be invested in emotionally (and hardly spiritually) in any way.

Weird again that this was the case but as of now they were all willing to knuckle under and merely anticipate what must be until the mother ship was encountered first hand.

"Even now signs of a great change are everywhere," they said to the group making sure to avoid eye contact at all times with any of them. Oh, it was all too anguishing otherwise to do anything but this. They had no response for the pleading way they looked at him as if they were half-starved dogs and Do and Ti was made wholly of chopped liver. They had invested everything in the notion that this plain but deeply strange man in front of him was a Space Age Christ who would completely remake them at a

point if they had observed his teachings to the letter. They saw him as their last and (let's be frank here) only chance to be delivered. For many of them deliverance would come in the form of simply being able to walk down the street without being laughed at. They saw themselves as beyond reclamation from a social perspective. And invariably they had come to the conclusion that society was beyond reclamation too. So, disbelieving in the Old Time religion of their forbearers, they looked to the stars for salvation. Many of them had seen every episode of the original *Star Trek* enough times to quote entire scenes from it with absolute accuracy. Many of them were suffering some degree of high-functioning autism though it would be another fifteen years before the concept was admitted into the psychiatric canon.

They still, despite their best efforts, had individual personalities, individual physical needs, and an outlook on life formed almost entirely by their unshared pasts just below Marshall Applewhite's inculcated belief system. They couldn't look at themselves yet with any objectivity and declare themselves to be per the dictates of the Heaven's Gate manifesto, "fully formed." They were quirky, needy, and still searching for the most part. Which was why they needed as much of Do and Ti as they could handle at the moment. They needed to have him seal the deal as it were with a single well-turned phrase.

Just beneath all their avowals they still possessed the ability to be able to look at themselves objectively. They realized at a certain level that they were inductees in a UFO cult. But they had come so far already down a lightless path that they felt the one way out was to move forward into the dark. They knew what existed in back of them. They knew ordinary society held no place for them.

They weren't by-and-large a weepy lot, if only because they all had become at least half-convinced that they were in the most optimal situation any human could hope to be in at the advent of the Great Recycling. But every so often they would stare at another younger member and intuit the pathetic trail that led them to this moment so far. There were no happy stories to be related that had occurred outside Heaven's Gate. Taken as a group the Away Team was a compilation of sunken chests, pasty skin, bloated

mid-sections, buck teeth, frizzy hair, grimy glasses and adenoidal voices. The certain knowledge that the punishments they received almost daily at the hands of society's sentinels because of these traits were supremely unjust. They deserved much better than to have been bullied, mocked and ignored the entirety of their lives for being ugly and nerdy. And so they were queuing up for their just rewards. There was a certain logic to their actions (if one could see their former situations as objectively hopeless beforehand). Because if there was no reward coming to them, then they were simply back to the status quo ante. Only one or two of the recent arrivals as far as anybody knew had gone in for the "work" as Do and Ti called it, down in Mexico. They still had wills of their own and would likely exercise them up until the point of no return when whatever great transformation (it was still unclear how it would unfold) happened to them and it was time to let go for good.

Ernesto Hernandez, prior to his joining Heaven's Gate, had been living in his sister's attic in East Los Angeles waiting for the right moment to make his move out into the world.

"I'd sit in there for days with a flashlight and a bucket that I'd use as a bathroom," Smmody told his pod after Do and Ti's address was finished. Every moment of the day was supposed to be regulated and spent in preparation for the long journey ahead. The ostensible purpose of these pods was to discuss what had just been communicated to them during the talk. But lacking any sort of clear direction it usually disintegrated into typical support group talk of abuse and degradation at the hands of those individuals who would now be counted amongst the Agents of Lucifer. It was just natural that this would happen. They all had their scars to bare or else they never would have gotten caught up with the likes of Marshall Applewhite. They all had the need to unburden themselves at the first moment when it was socially acceptable to do so.

The reason Smmody lived in his sister's attic alone was that he was justifiably terrified of going outside or even downstairs for a while to sit at his sister's table and eat like a normal person.

“She had a live-in boyfriend with Latin Kings affiliations,” Smmody told all those in his pod—Remmyy, Moeyy, and, Posityy, the former Liberty Johnson, Ken Luezinger, and Robert Lacombe respectively—failing to recall the boyfriend’s name or what his connection to the notorious Mexican gang was. It was only at night when the boyfriend had gone out that Ernesto felt free enough to come downstairs and maybe watch a little TV and get something to eat. Already at that point he had been beaten up so regularly that he assumed it was just a rite-of-passage for neighborhood kids attempting to prove themselves to whatever leader of whatever transient power structure was proving attractive to them at the moment. He assumed some gang, maybe the Latin Kings themselves, was behind it. He assumed the beatings were just the opening act of a torrent of degradation he would suffer for being so un-athletic and nerdy that people who had first come to know him felt he was clowning around just like Jerry Lewis had back in the day and would snap out of it at any moment and act more or less normal given the ultra-macho el barrio context of what it meant to be normal. Probably something was wrong neurologically with Ernesto to behave like such a spazz twenty-four seven. But by around age twelve, say, when children started to turn vicious, the damage to his reputation was done. Bullies at first wanted to fight Ernesto to make him prove himself as a man but he never fought them because he knew in advance what would be the outcome. So they approached—and sometimes they were girls who approached him—and punched Ernesto in the face. And then Ernesto would crumble to the pavement and when he was able to cradle his head in his arms and cry out in hope some adult authority figure would put a stop it. Seeing this at first many assumed he was retarded and came to his defense aggressively. But soon even the area’s tired cops knew enough to let things play out with him. They knew he was too weak to defend himself and that he would be a target all his life if he continued to live around here. They didn’t see the point in rushing to his defense in any dramatic way. Two days later the same scene would simply play out in another corner of the neighborhood. Ernesto Hernandez belonged some place different in the world altogether. Or

maybe there was no safe place for him in this world at all. He was a consummate victim. And they all figured the social safety net as it stood was too taxed to have to support a man through so many decades when he couldn't be taxed to learn how to ball his small hands into fists and fight back.

Towards the end, Smmody said, his sister kicked him out of his house altogether and he arrived at Heaven's Gate straight from the Orange County highway overpass he had camped under for several months with a pair of stray dogs and an old Samoan lunatic with no teeth in his head who called Ernesto his darling unto the moment of his self-administered death three weeks after he had been introduced to him.

"It was a relief, a big relief to learn all about y'all existing in the first place," Smmody, who had once been diagnosed (yes, that's the word the guidance counselor used) with an IQ of 145 said to the members of tonight's pod and smiled. He, through no direct word from either Do or TI, had appointed himself Watcher of the Night, and monitored the mansion's TV constantly looking for signs of the End. He wasn't an expert on this matter but because of his past he felt himself able to detect trends related to extreme violence. He felt an obligation to the group to stand as sentinel for them because of this talent. He felt the need to be the last one "beamed aboard" or whatever would be the case when it happened. It was all so unclear. He saw himself as a big brother figure to them all. He felt the need to protect them until it was too late to do anything about it.

Nowadays Smmody's bunk was the last in the row at the bottom so he could be the first one up around three-thirty in the morning to monitor TV constantly and report on the inevitable to his commanding officer.

"We'll have two or three weeks I'm guessing to say our goodbyes," Smmody said unto the pod, assuming the end would come in stages gradually. Actually about this point Do and Ti had been remarkably unclear but he assumed that this would be so. Anything short of a massive asteroid impact wouldn't do away with the earth immediately. So he assumed it would be like this necessarily, the report of a massive natural disaster like a series of volcanoes going off

at the same time spreading poison ash unto the four corners of the world. Until that time came they would, per the dictates of their teachers, maintain their rigorous training regimen up until the very end. But at the very least his sister was somebody to whom he would need to bid a heartfelt adieu. Probably she assumed he was dead right now or in some terrible shape. He had heard she had filed a missing person's report with the LAPD that Do and Ti had to drive up north to take care of on his behalf.

For themselves the others had different ideas about how the Great Transference would take place prior to the Great Recycling.

"We'll be there one minute, gone the next," Liberty Johnson, now known as Troddyy, told her pod, recalling the predictions of the Rapture from her Pentecostal upbringing. There was a ghost inside every person, you see, and when the ghost departed the body that surrounded it simply fell to the ground dead like a thick piece of gristle-laden meat. But unlike the Rapture she had been apprised that the only ones who would be taken to heaven at the time were in this room at the moment. Likely all of them would be raptured, but when it happened she assumed there would be no need to figure out what was taking place at all. God's love was like that, she realized. It made sense of everything once one was inside of it. And when one was in it all the pain of the former existence could be forgotten or even laughed at it like it was all some sort of bad dream, and having happened to a completely different person basically.

Heaven, she imagined, as per Ti's description as a boundless room on a spaceship whose circumference was limitless due to some sort of tardis-type of inter-dimensional engineering. And if you thought of something that object would immediately appear before you. But likely by then you would be empty of need and full of service, an angel clipped of its wings, sexless and, in the human accounting of things, joyless, devoid of body hunger utterly but so much better off because this was the case.

The clothes Liberty wore were loose fitting, owing entirely to the massive amount of weight she had lost in her ten months with the group. Now two hundred twenty pounds (from three hundred ten) she appeared as a type of half-deflated mocha colored balloon. The limp appearance

it gave her contrasted greatly with the constant motion of her hands and eyes. She was always communicating even when she was silent. She seemed burdened by her body's definite boundaries that she assumed would be overcome once the moment of transcendence was past. The state of grace was a state wherein all concepts were made clear at once. And once the word was spoken there paradoxically would be no need to speak any longer. But this absence of communication would be radically different from human silence in that it would exist in the shadow of complete communication and thus be an afterthought to those that had been saved. In Liberty's former life she never had the opportunity to speak as long as she would like. So she had dedicated herself of late to waiting patiently for the change to come. She wanted to be utterly free of physical limitations just as her name implied. She wanted to be able to speak the single word which cabbalists assure us was the true name of God just once and being silent forever just like the angels she sometimes saw in the tree outside her bedroom in Compton, California.

Of course like everybody else in Heaven's Gate she was turning it over in her head how the Rapture would come about. Do and Ti hadn't told anybody yet exactly how and she was starting to suspect that they were ignorant of the process itself. She was sure that there was a certain mechanism that must be involved regardless of its outward affect. Something physical in the universe must happen prior to its taking place, she was sure. A real change must transpire that predicted the inspired change that would take place if only a nanosecond later. Nobody would be fooled, and Do and Ti did not deny this in any of their teachings. There was one reality and this reality was a reality of things, objects that were subjects to immutable physical laws for all time. So the change if it was to be real must be an empirical change. And so you might believe that this was mere mechanics and could be predicted well in advance by the TELAHans and their computers that, to hear Ti tell it, were large as the span of the Milky Way and infinitely more complex. Maybe they knew and had communicated this to Do and Ti but they weren't speaking about it. But this was the sort of manipulative-ness that was supposed to be anathema to all evolved beings.

Evolved beings were emotionally transparent and service-oriented like Mr. Spock of the celebrated UFP starship, Enterprise. Driven by logic they had no place for power games. But there the silence remained from day to day. Other junior members had asked their leaders about it constantly. And they simply told them all to have patience and everything would reveal itself in time.

Presently in a corner of the mansion's great room, Marshall Applewhite stood with his arms folded over one another. He wasn't observing the goings-on but was trying to force back the flower of exhaustion that was blooming inside him so rapidly that he could feel his knees buckling before any attempt to find a temporary resting place for himself was made. His mouth was dry and his throat sore from speaking as long as he had. He was trying anything to avoid eye contact with his charges at the moment as he realized how physically weak he was. Another person would see this and immediately start to question his authority over the group. Nobody could imagine a spiritually advanced being suffering in the way Do and Ti were suffering in their fleshly prison at the moment. It didn't make any sense for creatures to be so exalted and so weakened at the same time. And immediately there would be doubt cast on Marshall Applewhite's true identity and whether anything he had been speaking about over the past twenty years had any validity and whether he was not simply the mentally ill man so many of his detractors had accused him of being for so long that nobody inside Heaven's Gate made any attempt to mount a counter-argument against it any longer. It was a cliché merely, a kind of verbal background noise not to be contemplated deeply at all.

A stranger among the strange, Marshall Applewhite presently found himself alienated from his own apocalyptic cult. It was a situation absurd enough that even he was able to recognize for what it was and smile weakly and briefly at what he had become. It was not all his fault certainly and maybe not his fault even slightly. And so the dark thought formed in him briefly to simply abandon this present group of followers and cultivate a new group somewhere else in the world entirely. It could be easily done, as simple as buying himself a plane ticket and

opening up a separate bank account for himself to transfer Heaven's Gate funds into. By tomorrow this time the new plan could be put into place. It would just be a matter of slipping out or making an excuse about where he was going if he was detected. The members had been conditioned to not ask probing questions. Their immortal souls depended on their ability to take orders and they had been conditioned to think this too. Marshall really didn't even know their given names. They were mere props to him mostly. He held no real emotional ties to any of them at all.

But if he tried to start again he would be admitting to himself that he was fallible and that perhaps the entire enterprise he had constructed was a nothing more than a madman's lie. Marshall Applewhite's ego would never allow this to occur. So he remained resolute in his present path even though he had no idea presently where it led. His charges seemed happy and no mutiny of any kind was in the offing. But he felt somehow Heaven's Gate was doomed and there was nothing he could do to resurrect it.

A lot of happy chattering was taking place amongst the assembled as somebody grabbed the large TV's remote and began to flip randomly through channels searching for relevant news of the world. Robert Lacombe, that soul so deeply troubled that even Do and Ti were considering forwarding him to mental health professionals within the state of California, was flopping around like a caught fish on a boat's deck seeming to attempt what amounted to a display of affection with the entire universe. In between them an emaciated ebony-skinned African whose name and face neither Do nor Ti could place shuffled amongst the pods aimlessly. Maybe another vision of Do's had come into the real world unannounced. Or maybe he had something to do with the present moment at hand.

"Your moment of deliverance is at hand," he said to Do and Ti revealing a non-specific African accent a pointed a bony finger at the TV. There on CNN a science piece was ongoing documenting the imminent arrival of comet Halle-Bopp, a hundred mile long snowball discarded from the Orc Cloud a half light year away by deeply mysterious gravitational forces.

So it was communicated by the reporter that Halle Bopp's arrival throughout history had been an auger of disaster. Mandarins in the fourteenth century had committed suicide at the first sighting of its tail. The great plague, the First World War, and the end of Mayan rule were all timed at this apparition's appearance supposedly.

"Bigger than a small asteroid but less than a big asteroid," the Caltech astrophysicist with the leaky pen in his pocket protector told the camera when asked about Halle-Bopp's size and what would happen if the comet perchance should collide with the earth. "It's big enough say to hide a giant spaceship behind," the astrophysicist said and then seemed to pause unnaturally. "*If a giant invading ship was there nobody would be the wiser (ha, ha, ha) until it was too late*."

Other than Marshall Applewhite nobody gathered in the great room took notice of this aside. But the damage was done before the channel had a chance to change. Too late for them all really for fate of a very dry, electronic sort had intervened. They would never to a person live long enough to realize what a misfortune just had befallen them and what might have been if somebody had been wise enough to have turned the goddamned TV off seconds before.

# Chapter Six → (January, 1997)

Freed from the fifty pounds of fat that had steadily accrued around his mid-section since his return from India decades back, Max Schein's corpse had been relatively easy for one person to extract from the tub by himself. By the time Lucky Murchison and Joseph Simione had come upon him in a moment of horrid discovery rigor mortis had long since set in. This effect lent rigidity to the body that allowed for an enhanced portability. Too bad neither of them had the motive to reclaim the corpse. They never had felt that strongly about Max when he was alive to restore dignity to him now that he had passed on.

Mostly submerged in bath water made opaque from soap, death shit, blood and the bit of diluted carbon that was created invariably in the aftermath of electrocution, Schein's body could have been, if a potential rescuer was motivated, pulled in any direction by a single locked elbow up until the point that it would collide with the tub's lip. Both Joseph and Lucky felt the need to keep their distance from the spoiled meat for superstitious reasons. They were spooked by its unexpected appearance and thought of it as a sign. Even now they weren't yet entirely convinced that Max was dead.

The weight loss had been striking because, as far as either of them knew, Schein hadn't been on a diet lately. This made them think that the person in the tub was an imposter. They still conceived of Schein as dumpy-Jewish.

They never formed a mental image of his protruding rib cage in all the time he had known him.

“He had some shit going on in his life I hear,” Lucky said to Joseph Simione, daring to probe at the floating body with the worn toe of one Adidas trainer. “But you could say the same for every man and woman on the face of this earth.”

Submerged under a half-inch of murky water, Schein from this angle looked to have been fairly healthy, if unanimated, except for the gathering blueness of his pallor. The twisted mask his face had been frozen into as a result of the convulsions experienced prior to the moment of death seemed anomalous to them as if he would snap out of it at any time. He didn’t seem all that dead that was to say, except for the fact that he was. The slight smell of deeply overcooked meat argued against this perception mightily. But it was so recent in their discovery that the sight of him and the smell of him had not yet merged into a singular object.

The way he died was so unpleasant also that it would take a few minutes for an ordinary observer to process exactly what had occurred.

“When you see one happen close up you’ll never live it down,” Lucky said to Simione recalling his time spent in Florida as a prison guard and the heinous use of the country’s last electric chair. Goddamn thing wasn’t fit to fry a dead turkey in let alone a live human being. Death was slow and sometimes the juice had to be applied for a second and third time before it took. Sometimes the body cooked itself before the heart stopped. Subject to a massive negative charge, the muscles of the body locked against each other and began to tear at the ripping points. Smoke from cooked flesh began to pour from the victim’s nostrils, the mouth, the genitals, and the rectum. And bits of broken teeth were emitted from the jaws involuntary because of the grinding that ensued. Absent of a ball gag, these jagged shards were known to fly in all directions and with unexpected arcs, lodging in the bonnets of the curious women and the waxed moustaches of curious gentlemen who had once gathered to witness the miracle of the modern age that was the electric chair first hand. The chair was Thomas Edison’s greatest publicity stunt. Only a fool

would have thought he had his heart in the right place when he thought of the idea. There was no human interest invested in the contraption's design. Even the most vengeful amongst the audience would later admit Edison had gone too far.

When you set out to kill yourself via the miracle of electricity, therefore Lucky explained to Joe, there's more than a simple death wish at play in the decision.

"He needed to suffer I think as well as escape," Lucky said of his former friend though one of these two goals at the moment one was much more on display than the next.

When the now half-burnt 240 Watt Craftsman eight-slice Breakfast King had been dropped into the tub, the entire building's grid likely was severely burdened. Pissed at his neighbors along with the rest of the world, maybe this misfortune was part of Max's plan all along. Give the bastards something to remember him by while he waited for their arrival on the other side. Maybe the absence of power would have acted as a distress signal to alert those in other units to come claim the body. All the stories about suicides that were allowed to linger for months, or became the dog's dinner, were familiar to everybody. Such a fate would have been a deep embarrassment to the sociable Max Schein even as it was a confirmation about the wisdom of offing himself in the first place. When nobody gave a shit enough about you to check in on you from time to time to see if you were in fact not dead there went your justification for remaining alive. On the other hand, nobody needed to have one's corpse rot into unrecognizability to draw the conclusion that you were utterly alone in this world. But at least to an objective observer it was proof that Max had been on the right track all along when he had begun to research the mechanics of death extensively during endless empty nights in the variety of domiciles that he had called home at one point in his life.

A heavy duty appliance to be sure, the Breakfast King. It was assumed by both Joseph and Lucky that Schein had chosen it because of its greater propensity to hasten the death of a grown man when it was dropped into lukewarm bathwater alongside of him than a run of the mill toaster. Indeed a hairdryer might have done the trick but then again maybe not. The only thing more pathetic than a

suicide was a failed suicide committed in earnest. Made you think of the poor dumb schmuck as a two time loser. And who could argue against such logic?

Max's body was being discovered in its relatively pristine state due to a mysterious summons that Joseph and Lucky had received in the mail days before.

"That White Nigger told me where the key was outside many months ago," Joseph said to Lucky using Max Schein's pet name for himself in memoriam. Simione had known Max slightly less than a year but for some reason Max had come to trust him completely and confide in him without being prompted and then in a very deep way. On such occasions a torrent of words would emerge from Schein lifted upwards on a geyser of barbiturates and alcohol.

He had told Joseph indeed on more than one occasion he was contemplating suicide. It never went any further than this usually. At the time there was nothing past the simple declaration that could be considered. The admission was never intended as a bit of braggadocio or a tortured cry for help. Simply a bit of objective psychological reportage on Max Schein's part. And until he actually made the decision one way or the other there was no reply required.

In death as in life so it seemed Max Schein was an estimable success. He could have directed movies if he wanted. So it was said of Max Schein constantly when he was still alive. He could have produced as well as directed. People throughout the Industry respected him deeply for his commercial instincts, for his perspicacity and his drive. He was very thorough in his planning with the scripts he undertook and never progressed to another step with them unless the one before it was completed. His screenplays were admired across the industry for their clockwork rhythms and the sense that a robust template had been rigorously applied while they were being written which emptied the work of the sort of idiosyncrasies that so many studio executives would have told you was a flaw, not a bit of personal expression (which was about as welcome in this town as a humble turd floating in a vat of two hundred dollar a bottle cognac).

To judge by his creative output, Schein didn't give a damn about art hardly. And this was why, ironically only to a Hollywood outsider, he was celebrated as a great artist. In his work as in his life he had left childish things behind. He had long since looked behind the curtain of creativity and saw the corrupted Kansan who had always stood there tugging on the literary levers. He knew art, *all* art that was to say, not merely that art which was on display in the cinema, to have been a gigantic fraud. And so, like the studio executives to whom he looked up to, he adjusted his actions accordingly. He had a message to proffer to the world. This was that emptiness was all. Osho the godman was dead in body and spirit and praise the lord for that. When alive he would have made a good studio executive or at the very least a successful screenwriter. He like all of them didn't believe in the ennobling spirit or anything like that. He would have seen great dignity in those like Max who realized that this was so and set out to drain the cultural swamps as it were. The artistic pursuit needed to be distilled into something less elevated altogether. Just like the manufacturers of colostomy bags would when one of the junior designers grew rhapsodic over one of their designs, a fillip needed to be administered to this industry's writers and directors who fancied their work profound. People became full of themselves from time to time and believed their own essence to be that of the godhead. One of the happy functions of commerce was to prove that this wasn't so. Money making was dehumanizing in a very good way. It made one realize one's place in the grand scheme of things. It made one happy merely to have a motherfucking job.

The useful aspect of suicide was that much commerce could be generated from it if one was in the mood to indulge briefly in an artistic cliché. Another beautiful soul, consumed by the Hollywood Dream Factory and so forth. Think of all the movies about the town you've seen from Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* on down that adopt this trope uncritically and for the entirety of their running time.

"I would have thought he would be more original than that in his thinking," Lucky said to Joseph Simione when this subject was inevitably broached. But perhaps Schein had been merely in pain and wanted to be rid of the pain as

quickly as he might. In this scenario he wouldn't necessarily be thinking along literary lines. He had traded in his vocation temporarily for that of the proverbial sad animal in search of the end of his suffering. He wouldn't have given a damn so much about how the conceit would have played to so many highfalutin others. In this instance he would have been in truly desperate circumstances. He would have merely been in need merely for his personal misery to end.

No way to tell now about any of this bereft of a suicide note. Maybe Max wanted it to end like this on a discordant note a la The Beatles' *A Day in the Life*. Just a single off-putting note that kept stretching to infinity. Max Schein would have appreciated the trope even if it was unintentional. He was always a writer even when he wasn't writing. It was a mindset basically with him more than a vocation. He couldn't stop his literary imagination if he tried.

As for the Breakfast King, likely it had been ejected from the tub altogether spurred on by either the violence of its short circuiting or Schein's body's spasms once the juice hit home.

"We don't have to jump to conclusions, you and I," Lucky told the young African minutes later after the twenty pound appliance was retrieved from where it lay just astride the digital scale on the bathroom's pink porcelain tile.

That was to say, the cause of death had been obvious but the motive behind the cause was as murky as the bathwater that he felt somehow compelled to drain.

Maybe, Lucky opined, Max had a hankering for toast while in the midst of his daily ablution. He thought to combine the two tasks innocently as a time saving device.

"You never know the shit people get themselves into when they're liquored up," Lucky said to Joseph who seemed to him the abstemious sort and thus this point needed to be made. Maybe in his native country alcohol was banned entirely and so its effects needed to be called out . He spoke English, Lucky knew, but maybe the effects needed to be called out regardless. It was an angle a foreigner like him might not have considered initially. They didn't understand the stress American life placed on certain

men. They didn't understand what would drive them to such desperate acts.

Probably Schein could have been considered a full blown alcoholic during the last years of his life but this didn't mean he was under the bottle's spell when he decided to plug the toaster into the bathroom's lone wall socket and hold it above his head for a moment in a Moses-like tableau. In fact what had occurred was that Max's boozing had pushed an already wavering mind over the edge. He might have been drunk for days prior to sinking into the tub in an attempt to shield himself from the dark thoughts that had taken hold of him. So in a sense it all could have been an accident if it could be proven there was some level of inebriation within him at the moment of truth.

How that would ever be proven was utterly impossible to say as Schein had insisted that whatever they were to find in his apartment upon entering or even whatever misperceived level of danger they found themselves in at a given moment they were not to call the cops unto the scene. Manly men, they all were in Max's conception, survivors whose survival depended largely on the ingrained notion that the prevailing authorities of a given principality were at best to be ignored and worst to be loathed and moved against in ways both subtle and unsubtle yet with consistency.

"*Thievery at its heart is a political act*," was the beginning of one of Max's familiar rants unto Lucky, often spoken in the dingy bars in West Hollywood where he had, unbeknownst to either of them, became a type of fixture. Slurred diction in corrupted light was the order of the day during such meetings, so much so the tendency for Murchison was to ignore such sentiments wholesale. But in the presence of his own corpse Max was hardly joking. Thievery at its heart was a political act he would also go onto say because of its rousing effect on the bourgeois. He realized those who perpetrated the thievery were not motivated by political concerns. But the effect was the same as any mimeographed manifesto. It set the herd in motion and this was all that was needed to affect political change. It made the ordinary jerk on the street realize that his or her government had no real answers for the remedying of the sorrow within.

So maybe there was such a thing as an unintentional radical. And sometimes even accidents could be seen as fraught with meaning if only a meaning that so many would be blind to for so long.

All of this in turn pointed to the notion that perhaps there was something deeper to Schein's death beyond a despondent man whose demons on one occasion happened to have gotten the better of him.

"He had some enemies without and within," Lucky said once they were absent of the bathroom and once more of Max, "but I didn't think those that were flesh and blood could actually do him harm."

Always the talk during the gin-soaked afternoons and Bloody Mary mornings had concerned the dearly departed Osho and his gang of orange-pajama-ed lunatics, those now at the Institute for Bliss, and the grudge they supposedly bore against Max for in the first place leaving their rank in the 1970s and in the second place threatening in the few media outlets that were available to a screenwriter to produce a filmic expose about the group with a less than objective frame of reference.

"It kept on coming but never arriving that train," Lucky Murchison said to Joseph Simione wondering for himself and not for the first time if this guru/con man Schein kept alluding to was real. Schein was much more of a do-er than a talker for so much of his life that you had to believe the apparent absence of doing in this regard meant that he was mentally unbalanced about the subject of his former spiritual master. Likely if he was capable of any sort of objectivity about the man they used to call the Bhagwan he would have as per usual knocked out a screenplay within the span of three weeks. But something was blocking him from gaining traction on this matter apparently. The notion likely had incubated for years, an undeveloped egg whose innards must have been deeply corrupted by this point.

He couldn't either start the script or abandon the script and so it might be reasoned this was what drove him crazy.

"He needed to forget about it," Lucky said to Joseph, "Just shrug it off and forget about it and chalk it all up to being alive in this day and age," he said. Maybe for somebody like Lucky who viewed objective reality as more or less a blank slate upon which anything might be either

written or erased this was an easy bit of advice to follow. Lucky didn't by-and-large hold a grudge against the obscenities that accrued against him like so many folded up newspapers on his door step when he forgotten to tell the delivery kid he was going fishing in Mexico for the month. Nor did he expect the authors of these obscenities to apologize for them at some future point. Maybe he was being callous in a way when he opted to forgive and forget so easily but so it went. Schein, Lucky felt, had the opposite problem always. Every painful moment in life was invariably recalled by him in an embellished manner, every embarrassment or foolish decision he had ever made seemed pregnant with dark moral implication. As opposed to a moment's drunken injudiciousness. Max felt that he had been letting the entire human race down when he erred. He felt somehow, despite so much objective evidence to the contrary, he was at the center of world events and needed to adjust his behavior accordingly. He had no room for error at all because he was so important.

In a way his personality was geared entirely to suicide. Simply because he felt himself too important to ever give himself a break when things started to go south on him. So things would build up in him until the point of no return was encountered.

With this in mind maybe they both should have seen the presence of Schein's corpse as something of a blessing for him as it signaled the end of pain. He still hadn't completely abandoned the hypothesis that somebody had killed Max. Such was the common reaction when confronted with the residue of a suicide but he still hadn't given up on the notion just yet. Even at the nadir of his despondency Max didn't seem to Lucky the type to take the gas pipe willingly. There was a substance to his misery that belied any form of fey surrender to the Eternal. He had told Lucky to go fuck himself on more occasions than Lucky could count. Just offhand he didn't seem the type to turn off his own lights in this dramatic way just because he was sad about the flow of life at the moment.

But who really knew with any certainty what was on a particular person's mind from one moment to the next? The piece of paper sent by Max that had arrived in his mailbox only this afternoon had been written in an uneven

hand as if he was suffering from some degree of distress in the midst of its composing.

“I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure,” Lucky said to Joseph Simione admitting for the first time that he was a rank stranger to him. Small talk had been initiated between them upon discovering the identical cream-colored paper with Schein’s handwriting on it balled in their hands but that was it. Somebody like Simione with his features like a Giacometti statue and mirthless eyes would have left an impression upon Lucky. Obviously not an American, he didn’t seem offhand an earthling either. Somewhere there was a planet of perpetually starving creatures and this was where Joseph Simione belonged. But he was here obviously summoned by Max. He would later go onto claim Max Schein being or having been his best friend in the world. He would in a few minutes admit so much sorrow at his best friend’s passing that he would also claim that it was impossible for him to cry.

In fact (and this too Mr. Simione would suppress unto the grave even when he was being questioned by police regarding events that had thus far transpired in this very apartment) Joseph had seen Lucky Murchison many times in his the few years he had taken up residency in Los Angeles and grown to despise him only slightly less than the three people he had killed in his life thus far. Murchison had in fact on several occasions screamed at Joseph for loitering around his Pachinko parlor in Little Ethiopia without having performed the service of playing a game. He told him on one occasion to get the fuck out because of this behavior and had waved his famous aluminum baseball bat at him. Where Joseph was from, when you waved a bat at somebody it was not intended as a threat to forestall further conflict but as a promise to, if possible, expedite the violence. So he had assumed at some point he was going to be attacked by the bulbous white man with the perpetually red face and made preparations against it. He had over the past few months bought himself a six inch hunting knife replete with leather ankle harness. It was on him even now just underneath a discreetly raised tube sock ready to be brandished. And with him he neither threatened nor promised violence but actualized it in as efficacious a manner as was possible. He was entirely

pragmatic about murder's use and abuse. He never thought of it as a weapon of terror and this on his part might well have been deeply naïve. He didn't see the world in terms of either kill or be killed. He saw the need to kill but he didn't relish the prospect. But this among other aspects made he and the men he had had actually wound up murdering so different.

The first and most noteworthy of these victims was the aforementioned Ethiopian warlord who upon the incursion of an AFRICOM force into the region had fallen upon hard times. Located at the time in the single row of respectable houses in the Burundian town of Bujumbura, he was easy pickings for Joseph as, sedated into dangerous oblivion by his lucre, he had made a habit of walking around the city accompanied by only one of his four bodyguards and with the safety on the silver-plated tek-9 that had once been held under the nose of many a refugee long enough for so many of them to identify the weapon by smell alone.

"He looked me in the eye and didn't flinch," Joseph would recall on many nights after the fact unto Gihanga, the guiding spirit of his fathers who had come to occupy a primary place in his consciousness over the past few years. Always Joseph could see Gihanga clearly if he closed his eyes, ensconced in his famous ivory throne, staring out in into the emptiness in which in this incarnation he was consigned. Gihanga didn't seem so interested really in Joseph's plight. But somehow he was present nonetheless for the testifying. For some reason, great as he was, he didn't seem to have a choice in the matter but to be present. Like any number of insubstantial spirits he lacked a will of his own. And this trait was in direct odds with the supposed power that was associated him. But taken up with his own intricate life narrative, Joseph ignored this discrepancy entirely. He was deeply flattered to be in Gihanga's presence and therefore didn't ask questions as to how this emotion could possibly be reciprocated. He was not a warrior, not a great spirit in absolutely any way that one would care to conceptualize the term. But, nevertheless, when he looked within, greatness stared back at him from a yellow-white throne. And he was long since corrupted by his own harsh personal narrative to ask how this might be the case.

Of course the warlord hadn't flinched when looking him in the eye because his case was so unremarkable as to be not merely forgettable but imperceptible by a man who had terrorized thousands sometimes at a time.

"It was as if he had never met me, as if he had never been aware of who I was and what my grievance with him might be," Simione said unto Gihanga who had suddenly taken some interest in the story and leaned forward from his throne's absurd depth. The bloody and good part of the story was soon to start apparently, the part where the old ritual of attack, then injury and death would be played out at least in summary and lend a certain piquancy that was missing from this slightly built man's otherwise unremarkable story of suffering and revenge. It is within the act of murder not surprisingly when we are all most alive. Both murderee and murderer would be obsessed with its machinations until somebody's life toppled over one of nature's boundaries and it ended. So in a way it all builds to this point. When it ended something very dear had been lost and it must be re-initiated as soon as possible. Grayer souls were not willing to admit that this was the case. And so it fell unto an insubstantial spirit (a being that was not actually there) to make this single truth of the world known. Even violent men like Simione would deny their essential nature until they were confronted with incontrovertible evidence of it through their actions. And so when something like the truth was about to be related Gihanga was forced to take notice. At least that's the way it would seem to another person on scene at the moment staring at the both of them through a gauze of dream and wondering who was observing them.

Easy enough, Joseph told his spirit, to follow him through the muddy, mostly carless street of the capital, locate his residence, then follow him the next day on the more or less identical reverse course where, just as the day before, John Smith would seek the solace of one of the city's few modern lavatories absent of the lone bodyguard.

"Men like him prefer to do their business in private," Simione had told his patron spirit one minute just before unconsciousness took him for the evening. "To him his piss is sacred just like his semen. He doesn't make a distinction between the two fluids. He doesn't make such a distinction

between shitting and giving birth. To him it's all of a piece. To him it's his strength but also the reason he is not now alive."

Joseph had crouched in a stall that Smith had chosen not to use. Which allowed him to sneak up behind Smith when he was otherwise occupied.

As somebody had told was the proper way to dispatch another human being in only a single cut, Joseph drew a large C at a forty-five degree angle on one side of the man's neck with a knife he had stolen from a butcher shop earlier that day. The idea was to sever the carotid artery quickly and preferably in two places so no effective direct pressure could be applied to the wound and allow for life-saving medical attention to be applied later on. Very likely he needn't have been so clinical in his approach. L ife-saving medical attention was largely missing from the immediate vicinity regardless of the cut made. A simple puncture wound under the arm might have sufficed to do him if sepsis would have been kind enough to intrude into the wound and antibiotics of every kind were in immediate short supply.

Regardless of the overkill involved in Joseph's approach, three minutes later the warlord's dead body was propped up in the same stall Joseph had once crouched in, reeking of nearly the gallon of blood that had poured forth from the wounds the square butcher's blade had created. As well as the eau de' cologne Smith had taken to dousing himself in these idyll days in an attempt to separate himself from the rabblement he was confronted with daily on his walks around this third world capital. Paris was the capital the warlord had longed to reside in but visa problems owing to his status as an international criminal had complicated matters significantly in this regard. So here he was sweltering in Burundi and unbeknownst to him a sitting duck. He had really worked out the logistics of his interment beforehand. He felt himself a type of living god and assumed the power that emanated from him would take care of the rest.

John Smith's contempt for those he had brutalized caused him to lower his guard so drastically, Joseph realized, that he never had the opportunity to pull his Tek out of its holster.

“He died like a dog shaking there and bleeding and begging for life,” Joseph told his guiding spirit even though, strictly speaking, this wasn’t true. In fact the warlord died silently with a look of wonderment in his eyes as if he was so assured of his immortality that when it turned out to be one more false promise of capricious Gods his whole body was forced to react to it even when it was otherwise and violently distracted. The dog didn’t know what hit him which was not especially surprising given the suddenness of the attack. But the fact that Simione felt compelled to lie about his victim’s final moments to his guiding spirit revealed an insecurity on his part that seemed to portend acts of less justifiable murder in the future. Simione was just warming up so to speak, because the first killing had left him somewhat unfulfilled. Or maybe he was fulfilled but couldn’t properly define what it meant to be fulfilled so he had assumed he was unfulfilled. Anyway he was on a dark downward glide path and taking great joy in his progress. He felt good to be damned. It was the only way he thought he could escape in earnest.

He didn’t see himself as damned as his actions surely suggested that he would be, however. Rather, Simione had over time come to conceptualize himself as a soldier of the downtrodden and forgotten. Vengeance was different from ordinary revenge if there was a moral dimension to it. He saw himself as the archetypal victim, therefore. He allowed himself carte blanche to murder and maim as he went. Nobody could convince him that his persecution of his perceived tormentors was not just. And nobody tried to do this simply because all but his victims had been unaware that such persecution was ongoing. He was very clever and controlled in his aggression. He might never get caught if he managed to keep himself in check in this manner. It was a constant balancing act with him. And he always found himself about to slip and begin to kill indiscriminately. He felt his whole known identity had become a mask existing to hide the true person within.

Gihanga in this incarnation had abandoned the use of masks entirely as it seemed his whole role had been to bear witness to Joseph’s sporadic and heavily redacted confessions. He didn’t have any secrets to hide nor a persona to project through the use of a common stage

prop. But to Joseph at least he was still known as somebody who contained various layers to him and was to be revered because of it.

At times like this when he could see him clearly enough to forget the King's fundamental unreality, Joseph, far from dominating the conversation, would keep silent and wait for Gihanga's wisdom to wash over him like so much water falling off the tear-shaped lake in a distant Rwandan paradise.

"Your victims' had their heads removed from their bodies like flowers are removed from their stems," Joseph remarked to his spiritual master, disappointed and mildly irritated that he was the one to have initiate the conversation. No such sage crystalline language had affected him or even been detected in the interim between Joseph's words. Silent as any half-formed illusion ought to have been, Gihanga the Conqueror merely sat forward on his throne and stared. This indicated likely neither belligerence nor coyness on his part so much as a still tenuous connection to reality on Joseph Simione's part that at this very moment was absent from other seekers of the time after divine wisdom (see: Marshall Applewhite) whose fantasies arrived more or less fully formed, taciturn only to the point that its imaginer's own unconscious had grown weary of the projection and attempted (futilely) to reconnect with reality by muting the hallucinations, if only for a time.

At least in a clinical sense Joseph Simione was not crazy and could very ably if pressed separate reality from fantasy. His great problem at the moment, however, was that he had no psychological support system to press him in this direction. So he was left to drift. Not surprisingly his violent behavior tended to coincide with the frequency of these visions. An ebony-skinned foreigner, he was neither coveted by America's mainstream (underneath which much of the nation's social safety net resided) nor was he appreciated enough by what passed for the counterculture in 1996 to be given a helping hand by them. Outside of the perimeter of the country's outsiders, he simply was off society's radar. And this state of affairs of course fueled his pathology greatly.

But to him at the moment everything was just OK. Ordinary human affairs tended to produce violent behavior as a by-product as far as he was concerned. And thus Joseph saw himself responding to more or less normal stimuli in a very normal way.

The reason for his rather infrequent visits with Gihanga he surely felt had nothing to do with a budding bit of pathology so much as a healthy communing with other guiding spirits that existed in the world as claimed by so many of the animist faiths he had encountered once heading south out of the death camps of Ethiopia into the pre-genocide Rwanda that was noted amongst other things for its beautiful lakes and many exotic beliefs.

The machetes that would be used on the Tutsi populace seven years later were very much in evidence when Joseph had been begging in Kigali. They were worn in the belt loop of so many aimless young Hutu men that it seemed to Joseph like a type of socio-religious obligation to do so, like a Jew with his kippa. He hadn't known the machetes' social significance back then. And even now it had not occupied the center of his attention even slightly. He had no idea about the root of the conflict. This, too, he ascribed to the way things merely were. Even after the reports started trickling in of the genocide to America he gave it very little thought. He didn't know the name of anybody who had died.

Men have their own justifications for the acts they commit against each other and it's absurd really to claim that one sort of philosophical outlook was superior to another and that we should all conform to a certain mode of behavior and for all time. With this in mind, Joseph saw his escalating violent actions as a bit of self-expression. Which was, he gathered, a real social obligation once one had taken up residence in the Land of the Free. He had no idea how far it would all go. In a very real sense it was not his obligation to place such an artificial constraint on himself. If he was doing something terribly wrong society would constrain him eventually and that would be that. Over time he had convinced himself that this was the way it had worked. There was no thinking required on his part. There was really nothing to consider from his perspective.

If the universe found his behavior abhorrent the universe would issue a corrective ere long. And if there was no moral force in the world then everything was permitted. So fuck off and die.

Over time, and during the short period he had known him, Max Schein had articulated many of these thoughts to Joseph though for slightly different reasons than Joseph's desire to justify murder.

"He made it known to me that it was every person's obligation to resist their evil instincts," Simione told Lucky Murchison recovered from his momentary reverie. "Maybe," he said, "this was his way of admitting the struggle was too great for him."

Lucky didn't believe that. He thought it was not exactly respectful of Simione to suggest Max's suicide was rooted in any rational accounting of the world.

On the other hand, every dead body was a type of untranslated rune unto which anybody could ascribe any interpretation they wanted at least in the short term. But that didn't mean it was socially acceptable to come right out and blurt out your pet theory. His corpse was after all just one room over. By lights it should have been another few days before one could take his name in vain. Ghosts emerged from vengeful spirits who had been in some manner wronged past the point of their death. If only for one's own spiritual wellbeing, one did not blaspheme the dead so soon after the great rending of soul from flesh had occurred. Everybody fucking knew that. Dumb jigaboo with the Brillo hair. Only a type of nutcase would start in with the defamation of a dead man's memory so soon.

The identical note that both Simione and Lucky had received today specified that Schein's body should be disposed of in accordance with the Tibetan Buddhist practice of sky burial.

"It's not gonna happen," Murchison said to Simione, noting the expense and illegality of the ritual, banned in California presently, which involved the corpse's evisceration and feeding to various cliff dwelling carrion as a last compassionate act from one sentient being unto the next. Buddhist monks would need to be brought in from God knew where to perform the ceremony properly. Likely it would all have to be done on the down low so as to avoid

running afoul of state-level peace officers who had nothing better to do with their time than harass funeral mourners.

Five seconds after first seeing his friend's floating corpse, Lucky had decided what he would do for Max Schein was jack shit. He had no intention of being coerced like this, to have to tend to Max's corpse like it had once belonged to one of his children. Schein had written a note requesting that Lucky do just this in effect. But it didn't work like that with him and you would have thought Max knew this was the case. First off, there would be a cost to preserving the body before the Buddhist ritual took place. Also, they would need to hide it from the prying eyes of the coroner who Max had demanded be kept in the dark about all of this. To do this Lucky would need to discover a private means of conveyance for the admittedly slimmed down body. Maybe he would need to bribe whoever it was in charge of the conveyance to keep quiet about the cargo. Or maybe they could try to move him themselves and risk arrest and any number of criminal charges including being an accessory to murder. In the best case scenario they would get away with it and merely be out several thousand dollars and all the time it had taken for the plan to be realized. In the worst case scenario they would go to the penitentiary for the rest of their fucking lives. Hard to see how Max could have thought this range of possibilities would have proven acceptable to either of them. But maybe he hadn't, actually. Maybe he just wanted them to find his body. He never would have expected either of them to go to the trouble of a sky burial. Maybe he was just trying to avoid being one of All the Lonely People. Its possibility would have been a fate that would have haunted him so greatly that he would not have wanted to go through with it at all.

Instead of tending to him in the manner that Max had requested, what Lucky would do for him would be to phone into the police anonymously and have them take care of it all.

"It's what some of us pay taxes for," he said to Joseph Simione, assuming a lack of employment on the part of the scruffy African, a second before he realized he was wasting his breath with him. Joseph Simione was exactly the type not only to ignore any sort of advice given to him by a

stranger but actively work against it simply out of spite. But if Joseph wanted to adopt the entire burden of Max's request that was fine with Lucky. Lucky would leave Simione here to do as he wished. Owing to the present state of its owner, it wouldn't be a very good idea to swipe anything from the condo as stolen property turning up in your possession that originated from the apartment of a man who had died under mysterious circumstances was never an attribute of successful people. Better to get on with the task of securing the corpse and keep the note under lock and key in case you were discovered in the act. Despite his emaciated otherworldliness, Joseph had been marked by Lucky as somebody who had understood that this was the case. Which led invariably to the question about how he had come to know Max in the first place. Simione didn't seem the type to move in what passed for creative circles in the Basin. He could see the scars on his hands even in the apartment's poor light. He seemed a day laborer to Lucky. Or at best maybe he was associated with the construction arts. Perhaps Simione was a con artist merely putting the touch on an emotionally weak man. But this too didn't seem likely. In truth, all these yellow-eyed East Africans native to the area in which Lucky lived and worked gave him the creeps big time. To him they seemed like living ghosts, merely ethereal stand-ins of former flesh and blood people that had been condemned to haunt the world due to some terrible crime they had committed in their former incarnations. They were not to be engaged directly lest some curse be levied against the engager for all time. There was something feral about them that seemed deeply out of place in the waking world as if they were refugees from a dream world that had unfortunately for all concerned escaped into the world of sunlight and concrete. This was essentially a racist characterization of a group of dark-skinned foreigners and Lucky would not have necessarily disagreed with the characterization. But so many black people he knew were racist that he thought turnabout was fair play. He didn't harbor true resentment against East Africans' presence in LA so much as fear them and experience an undercurrent of physical disgust whenever they passed. As a people they all needed to dress a little better, hit the gym a little

more judiciously in an attempt to add muscle mass, cut their hair shorter and fix their teeth so they didn't seem so foreign in the already alienating environs of Los Angeles where nobody felt at home, even those families who had put down roots here a century before.

Max Schein was a Los Angeles native, it should be noted, but he was never so at home when he had turned his back on his hometown. He had once boarded a plane for the sub-continent with vague intentions of turning in his U.S. passport at the nearest consulate upon arrival and calling it a career as an American for good.

"He was a bum at heart," Lucky said to his former friend and thought about the reason for his presence on scene. Max Schein as a screenwriter had enough confidence about how a story should progress to know that this request about how his body was to be disposed of would be a non-starter at least with him. Maybe this extra skinny East African ran a little deeper than Lucky did and would yield to the request. But based on his comments thus far in this brief meeting concerning Max's disposition, he rather doubted that this was true. So the mystery remained in Lucky's mind about what indeed had actually occurred in the bathroom. Somebody else would investigate and get to the bottom of it eventually. Once one foot was out the door of this condo with an ocean side view, the process of forgetting all about it would be in full swing for him. Friends came and went in this life surely. And the loss of one friend even under the grimmest of circumstances should not be enough to darken a man's day completely.

Lucky Murchison was good at forgetting. Two weeks from now he would struggle to recall Max's address. Two months from now he would have forgotten all about the circumstances of his death. Only the memory of the imposition would remain.

Sky burial! He was pissed about it now and would be for several months. He was wondering if by chance the letter wherein the act had been requested had been mis-delivered. Maybe this had been attempt at a joke on Max's part that had failed due to the direness of the circumstances. Usually Max was more cunning than this.

He knew how to make his way in the world. Usually he didn't need to be forgiven about anything.

To judge by his living room's many upturned objects certainly it seemed that he had been pre-occupied up until the last moments of his life. Its musty smells suggested a relative absence of tidy housekeeping. Everywhere in the living room images and books devoted to his former master Osho were scattered at odd angles that suggested not superficial perusal but on-going use for research of the sort he had always claimed to be performing for a massive expose. This had admittedly no chance whatsoever of making it to the light of day. Osho having left the realm of the living in 1990 at age fifty-seven was still a potent force due to the influence of his foundation's lawyers. So there would be considerable legal hurdles to overcome if such a film was ever to see the light of day. Also, there was the reality that nobody but Max seemed to find Osho an especially compelling figure. There was a layer of plausible denial for all his heinous behavior that seemed to work against the notion that Max was promulgating. He thought Osho pure evil and worthy of vilifying posthumously.

To most he seemed a typical westernized Indian guru, albeit one with a controversial background. They hadn't been with him all the years like Max had, however. They didn't know what he did or wanted to do if circumstances and specifically visa restrictions had allowed him to do to those he considered his enemies.

There were all these videotapes strewn around that seemed like so many numberless fallen dominos.

"He played one once for me," Lucky said to Joseph of one of the tapes and kept silent momentarily. He thought he heard somebody moving in the hallway. The front door was unlocked and if either of them were caught in here at the moment they likely would be spending the rest of the week in jail at a minimum. They had done nothing wrong up until this moment but they would still have drawn suspicion onto themselves if only because of their nervous demeanors while in the face of questioning. It would have taken some time for it to be untangled. And Lucky Murchison had a high enough self-opinion to disdain having to spend even a second in LA County lockup.

So he thought the prudent course of action would be for him to simply get the fuck out of there quickly as he might after removing any physical evidence that he had ever been there in the first place. But he had a change of heart once Simione started doing the same thing for himself.

"If I get caught on the way down," Joseph said to Lucky smiling as he worked, "I blame you for everything. For all of it," Joseph told him. "I say to them that you threatened me with violence if I didn't do your bidding. Everybody will believe me and not you. I'll tell them that I never knew this man, unlike you," he told Lucky. "And unlike you I have no criminal record. I'm a stranger to them all," he said. "Unlike you I have no reason for being here at all."

Perhaps he said he would simply walk to the police station an hour later and tell this story to them of his own volition. For himself he had no reason to fear authority at least in this country.

"Anything I can do to fuck you over, white pig," he said to Murchison describing succinctly as he might the terms of their relationship. He didn't at the moment feel the need to explain himself in any further detail. He didn't tell Lucky that they had met before. He didn't elaborate on the depth of his hatred for him.

Simione was out the door of the apartment only a minute later and quickly enough to leave Lucky Murchison with the impression that his actions had been premeditated and to a degree choreographed.

It was a set-up from Jump Street, Lucky thought. Well, maybe. In reality Joseph Simione had merely seized on a moment's temporary inspiration to explain himself to Lucky in this way. Maybe there was a hidden clockwork driving this scene that would in due time reveal itself by association. Murchison himself had no intention to investigate a goddamned thing. He knew enough of the law to realize he was in too deep at the moment. He had no desire to get to the bottom of this matter and in particular Joseph Simione's motives. He assumed that at the bottom of every hole one dug for oneself there was merely darkness and vermin to be encountered. In a way it really wasn't a mystery what lay underneath the visible world. Not even suicide, the most humble act that can be performed in this life, could escape a devilish plot twist

when Max Schein was involved. He thought that Max Schein deserved better, slightly. He assumed that absent of the intervention of the police there would be no justice rendered for anybody who had become involved in it.

When Lucky Murchison finally left Max's condo it was via a velvet touch on the door after another half hour of inspecting the place and assuring himself that there was nothing that might connect him to having been in the place just at this time.

"I've done the best I've could," he said to himself riding down by himself on the building's elevator. Well, in this context, "the best that he could," should have meant him never answering Max's summons in the first place. He was too much of a softie to have done that to his old pal. He had his head up his ass when it came to sentimental notions of friendship. He lacked the ability to distinguish a friend's reasonable request from which would have by rights been an unreasonable strain on the friendship and have caused it to fray then snap in two.

Once out on the street he had started to disremember the entire reason that he had been Max's friend at all.

"You're too good looking to be so lost in thought," Filer, the building's aforementioned Maintenance Man said to Lucky Murchison when he saw him with his head down staring at the pavement. Despite all the tattoos that covered so much of his visible skin, Filer had taken him for one of the well healed guests that came and went from this complex with regularity. Thus he sought to ingratiate himself to him. Such ass-kissing seemed a force of habit with him. The fact that Lucky ignored him completely and kept on walking silently didn't seem to make Filer re-consider his original overture to him. He was locked into this mode of behavior which was to act the fool in front of those he believed were fully instantiated into society's more desirable realms. In this manner, over time, his lot in life would improve by degrees. He felt this was the only way it would ever happen for him. Hard work was a fool's errand, a type of gross imposition upon those in dire need of economic betterment from those who themselves had never worked a day in their lives. Filer was not one of the true believers in the American Dream hardly. He felt all of America's upward-facing entrance ramps had been land

mined and booby trapped to such a degree as to make them completely impassible. So what you needed to do was hitch a ride on the caboose of one of these swell sucks who knew the password that allowed them to avoid the booby traps altogether. They needed to take pity on a body if only because it was in their marginal best interests to do so. Filer slavered over them like the world's friendliest St. Bernard. They liked having him around sucking their dicks. And so they would throw him a crumb every now and again.

Needless to say, such a worldview that motivated the behavior, especially when left to fester unarticulated, created a certain bitterness within Filer directed at those he looked to solely regarding matters of personal advancement.

"May your balls become infested with tiny green beetles," he said to the same bit of sidewalk that had apparently obsessed Lucky Murchison to the point that he had ignored the fake compliment that he had just been paid, "and have their offspring devour them in stages."

Look, Filer didn't expect that everybody he tried to bond with should automatically produce their checkbook and make with the alms for the poor. But a bit of eye contact would have been nice. It was just ordinary politeness, he thought, something that should have been done automatically as a bit of rote courtesy from one human being unto the next. When somebody stared right past you like that when you were paying her or him a compliment you should assume that there was a degree of belligerence to them that would have passed otherwise undetected on a chance encounter. But once it was out in the open in this way it could neither be ignored nor forgiven. So much so that you might want to say that a pathological lickspittle like Filer should be more judicious always in the people he chose to suck up to. If only because when attempting to cultivate a friend he had made an enemy instead.

Now when and if Lucky Murchison happened to walk by once more, Filer would have to hide from him lest the insult repeat itself anew. Too many degrading moments like this happened consecutively and Filer would be forced to revert back unto the animal state that various psychological

experts had frequently accused him of always harboring just beneath the surface regardless. He didn't want to go back to that inexcusable lifestyle that such a reversion would invariably lead to. Prison, of course, and sleeping in one's offal in the odd rubber room.

But, you know, when a man lost his cool he was at the moment beyond rational choice. There wasn't a lot he could do in that eventuality.

So he needed to hide himself from conflict if only because it was better for him to do so long term.

Anthony Filer didn't want to go back to the state penitentiary, no how. He didn't want to have to start machining the aluminum slats underneath his bunk into homemade daggers like before as a means of self-protection. He didn't want to have to start having to re-learn the art of sleeping with one eye open at all times so as to keep the very real boogeymen of the world at bay for another night.

Anthony had a temper to him that he conceptualized as being some sort of sleeping tiger that once roused would become inconsolable rapidly.

"You behave yourself, mister," he said to his pet Madagascar hissing cockroach, Boorstin, upon entering the Schein residence via the building's master key an hour after Lucky Murchison's departure from it. "Presently," he said, "we need to keep things under control if only for our own sake. We need to behave like gentlemen of honor even though so many others near to us do not share the same compunction."

Talking to Boorstin through the brown paper bag he used to tote him around nowadays, Filer seemed deadly earnest in his attempt to communicate with the arthropod.

"Don't make a mess," he said to the creature, who, absent of ears, had heard only those vibrations that its exquisitely attuned antennae allowed it to hear, and process that sense data that its miniscule brain allowed it to process, usually related to matters entirely of either sustenance or flight or (in the two days of its lifecycle that it was allowed to do so) copulation.

Added to such inter-species communication, Filer had reinforced the bag's edges and interior with plastic to keep

the creature from boring through it and thus soundproofed Boorstin's home inadvertently.

"You ignore me at your peril," Filer said to Boorstin and turned the bag upside down on Schein's coffee table so that he would be allowed out. Somehow it was suspicious of Anthony and his intentions toward him. It was reluctant to be exposed unto the light of day.

Also the creature was in possession of a high frequency hiss that according to some entomologists aided in the digestive process but also had the effect of warding off potential predators.

"If I let you out," Filer said to Boorstin all three inches of him, upon making sure that he was the sole human in the apartment at the moment who had heard his pet's latest song. "You gotta promise me you'll be careful where you roam to. I'll let you off your leash just now," he said referring to the three foot length of dental floss he had tied around the creature's thorax with vague intentions of walking it around. "But when I do you gotta promise me you'll stay out of trouble for the duration," he said. "Don't shit anywhere where it's too conspicuous, for example," he said. "Also, you gotta promise me not to get into the man's bathroom for now."

An especially large specimen of Madagascan hissing cockroach with a mutated extra facet on each compound eye, Boorstin heard Filer's words as bits of uninteresting (i.e., not likely leading to food) vibratory effluence coming from a mysterious source.

"Thanks your putting your faith in me," Anthony said to the creature and then carefully as he could removed it from the paper bag using a bit of force.

Boorstin's two pairs of hind legs were equipped with a sticky mucous for hiding in crevices. It didn't seem all too eager to emerge into the Schein's residence's increasingly redolent confines. Ordinarily death's fragrant emanations attracted lifeforms of its ilk insistently like the music from the Pied Piper's flute. But for some reason presently Boorstin was reluctant to emerge. It didn't seem too keen on Anthony. And even inside the bag it had assumed a defensive fighting posture with its cloaca scraping the bag's bottom at those times when its scent could be located with its antennae's receptor hairs. The dental floss's loop had

steadily migrated upward until it was placed just underneath one pair of flailing arms. He had (so much as a creature of miniscule intelligence could) a sense of foreboding about this place as if the danger in it was so obvious it required neither frontal lobe nor cerebellum to be able to detect it. Weird things happened in such a place and then in weird off-putting ways. For Boorstin the scavenger, the presence of a dead body was the only redeeming aspect of this apartment. Filer himself Boorstin saw as a relentless predator. And everything else about the place was demon-haunted and filled with frustratingly imperceptible dangers just beyond its antennae's usually adequate scope.

On this occasion in fact, Filer needed to tear the bag in half to remove Boorstin from it all the way.

"Now you're free to do whatever," Filer said to Boorstin sensing for the first time rejection in the creature's reluctance to appear. He wondered at the real hurt in his voice. It was all a joke up until a point with him. He realized how strange his behavior was deep down. He realized nobody looked at a huge disgusting bug and saw anything much to love.

Presently he had to admit he had true feelings for Boorstin. And that somehow the creature held true though unreadable feelings toward him.

Anthony Filer had made sure to regularly soak the dental floss in turpentine before reapplying so as to preclude Boorstin from trying to eat it.

"Mind your master," he told the arthropod before moving away into another part of the apartment altogether. He was confident for some reason he could reclaim the creature at his leisure. Unlike its mainland African cousins this species of beetle didn't seek out the crevices of a room instinctively. It was a jungle dweller primarily. Its primary instinct besides food was to lay its eggs in as opportune an environment as possible and then expire from the effort in a Wagnerian paroxysm of sacrifice unto nameless ancient Gods.

Filer was unaware of all of this completely and assumed his pet would be his pet for many years like a dog would have been.

“If you break it you bought it,” he said to Boorstin facetiously of the piece of furniture he was crawling on. He had by this point lost track of the creature completely in the darkly lit living room and was not worried about it even slightly. Anthony was full of the love for the world at the moment. He assumed that everything would work out for the best for him and his pet.

He was in a place he shouldn’t have been in by lights. And the act of transgression somehow when introduced to an otherwise repressed psyche had proven temporarily euphoric as the intra-nasal ingestion of cocaine.

“We’ve got the run of the place to ourselves,” Filer said to Boorstin from the comfort of Max Schein’s leather couch and thought to maximize the pleasure of his stay. Being here, he thought, was like being on vacation in some exotic locale. Vacationing was a mindset primarily one entered into more so than a physical situation. It was a state to be savored perhaps too self-consciously to be able to preserve one’s dignity fully regardless of how many layers of irony one placed mentally between one’s thoughts and one’s actions for the short term.

There was a refrigerator to raid eventually. But in the meantime Filer was content to kick back and enjoy the environs such as they were. He already felt deeply at home here somehow. He felt this had been his condominium all along but it had been stolen from him and he was only now being returned to it. Absent an intercession of the cops he planned to return to it tonight and go to sleep in Max’s condo. He could use his own sheets on Max Schein’s bed. He had earned the right he felt to proceed in this way. He felt he could do so and not be caught hardly. He felt himself as clever as that altogether. He felt somebody beyond the ability to become trapped by his own peculiarities hardly.

Absent of the horrible mess in the bathroom, it was a truly nice apartment.

“We’ll need to take that wall out completely,” Anthony said to himself once comfortable enough to actually look around at his new place in earnest. Approaching footsteps from the hallway outside didn’t bother him even a little now. If somebody knocked he would rise and walk over and very politely announce himself as the building’s

maintenance man. With Schein's body still lying in the tub there was nothing that any outsider could pin on him. The cops could bust his balls, but likely they would have announced themselves prior to the door opening. And they weren't due likely for another day until the body ripened unto truly offensive proportions.

Until that moment when his dream was burst the apartment was both Filer's and Boorstin's to do with as they wanted.

"I know he was a boozer," Filer said to Boorstin of Max Schein and went in search of a bottle of something brown that was preferably unopened. From the shadows of the building's basement, Schein had witnessed Max's uneven progression across the lobby to the bank of elevators in the early morning hours when, often as not, Filer had just started work. Trying not to be judgmental with the man, nevertheless, it seemed to Anthony Filer that he was punching above his weight when he claimed himself in dire need of alcohol when attempting to make it through another day.

"I don't think his life was full of sorrow," he said to his pet cockroach who had stood briefly up on two pairs of hind legs on the shag pile carpet. Typical aggressive behavior this, as if he had spied another of its kind and was spoiling for a fight. Life was endless conflict, endless violence for a certain type of godly creature. But mercifully these were usually too dumb to realize their horrible fate.

Maybe a common centipede was slinking around the room's corners emitting a telltale scent. More likely Boorstin had gone a bug version of insane. It was misperceiving reality. It had inherited its master's disturbing predilections.

"As long as you have money you have no right to be sad," its master said to Boorstin and clinked the change in his work shirt pocket. "Doesn't make sense to be low as long as you have cash to spend. There's no logic to claiming you're out of sorts in any way when you could go anywhere and eat anything and have all sorts of adventures for yourself that most people could only dream about or not even dream about as they would never know such things existed in the first place and simply wouldn't miss them. Being low implied living in a state where

economic choice was systematically denied. Poverty was by definition a type of mental illness. But out of necessity the powers that be never conceived of it in this way.

All around this spacious apartment indeed, Anthony began to notice the remainders of a frozen happiness at least in the low key quasi-spiritual way it was expressed at this time.

Original works of Indian art lined the walls and in the center on the coffee table that Anthony had just used to divest Boorstin of his temporary home, a Hindu samsara, a series of intertwined rods sat in one corner inviting inspection from all interested parties of which there was exactly none in the condo at the moment.

*Miracles of the Soul*, read the label of the ejected videotape sitting in the sleek VHS player underneath the TV set. To Filer, this too suggested something vaguely exotic if not outright New Age/Eastern. Westerners after all did not find anything particularly “miraculous” about a “soul.” Really they felt the concept of miracles to be wholly played out and this went double for the deeply religious of the West more so than those devoid of any religious feeling utterly. The world was the way it was whether God declared that it was or not. And that which would manifest itself as miraculous was that which was merely and temporarily incompletely understood. Miracles simply did not happen in the modern age. They were savages for the most part, drunken lowlifes, and those generally too dumb to understand the regularities of nature whether or not these regularities were God-ordained. People went to church and celebrated the visions of select Bronze Age Hebrews simply because it seemed they were ancient enough to not be caught in the lies they likely committed on the way to them. No more miracles for the Information Age, no more burning bushes to put on display forevermore. But the Eastern mind still seemed to be rife with magical thinking. Magical thinking seemed to be India’s primary export really next to the spices that set in Filer’s rack unopened since they arrived being a Christmas gift from the condo’s management team in lieu of a two percent raise.

When the tape was inserted and then play button pressed on the remote that Filer found located between two

leather cushions, a distinctly eastern-looking orange-clad mystic appeared inside the room's enormous TV.

"I knew this shit would happen absolutely just like the back of my hand," Filer told himself when the mystic after an intentionally uncomfortable pause declared himself God. Or some God. He was (as was the tendency of all mystics) spectacularly unclear about the subject. He was saying amongst other things that God did not exist but that he was God Himself. He said that he was a religious teacher with nothing to teach. Amongst other things he claimed himself as a fountain of all knowledge not a bit of which he ever felt the need to state in rational terms for a skeptical audience.

You either believed or disbelieved in him and his philosophy he was saying, both to those watching the video at home and also to an audience just outside of camera range who gasped and laughed at every half-formed thought the mystic uttered always ending with this languid pause that encouraged the behavior. He was at that moment as much of a showman as a guru. He seemed to be taking great pains not to break into a smile as he spoke in anticipation of the reaction of the faithful to his words. To even him their reactions seemed over the top. The mystic sat in the center of the universe giving it the finger. And nobody saw the preposterousness of this situation but him. He had them all fooled completely. He would never be caught as long as he had the power to form words.

Osho was the name that was shouted back at the mystic halfway through each elongated pause as if the single word had become a benediction. *Osho, ghoshana!* they cried using the familiar American mispronunciation that would pass wisely uncorrected by those who knew it as such. *Osho Bhagwan, Osho the wise!*, they cried unto him who seemed in no mood to contradict them. He had obviously planted the notion in them. He had likely mentioned it a time or two before the tape had advanced this far.

"If you look into his eyes for more than a second," one of these worshippers told the camera minutes later after the mystic's address had petered out almost under the weight of its own nonsense, "you see the universe in microcosm. You see everything you ever were and everything that you have the ability to be. If it's not too

heavy a trip for you to bear then you'll remember everything you've yet to experience! And then you'll be changed forever because you remember just like it's your first day alive."

All the men and women comprising Osho's coterie in this tape were mostly American and clothed identically in orange short sleeve shirts and drawstring pants like they were the members of the cult that they would deny that they were members of to their dying breath. Nothing was forced about their exuberance, no emotion was being artificially projected on account of the camera's presence. Rather they genuinely seemed to be in love with their master and to be in love with every word their master spoke to them. Manna from heaven, every syllable and those who didn't think so were at least cowed enough to hang back and not state their opinion about what they had just witnessed in such a forward way.

After this session had dispersed they would reconvene an hour later in their meditation center's (main hall) and consider Osho's words and what they held for humanity in the short term and what they held for the cosmos in the long term as so it seemed with the single word of a holy man universes were remade and destroyed in an instant.

To Anthony Filer it was passingly strange that the entirety of these suppliants' education led to the startling conclusion that nothing was real (which was every illiterate thugs' singular notion as well). The suppliants believed rather that only thought and sensation were real. And the deeper their thoughts and sensations were the greater their access to the Godhead would be all along. All the science and rationality of their schooling not to mention their society had been discarded completely by them and in a single moment likely just after examining the scabrous interior of Osho's soul. They had all passed the point of no return regarding the legacy of the West. Presently they were rediscovering the world through an entirely original rubric as if all of this mystical mumbo-jumbo was not the remains of thousands of years of forgotten and absorbed religious movements twisted into something provocative that ought to have known better but whose narcissistic personality traits precluded him from doing better even as multiple investigations into his conduct were launched daily

by various state agencies who suspected the Rashneesh movement of crimes ranging from tax evasion to acts of bio-terrorism relating to a mysterious outbreak of food poisoning in a town near to their new Oregon compound.

If they had doubts about anything, the thoughts were buried far below the standard Rashneeshpuram mode of behavior. Which was this cloying type of extroverted insouciance that mixed the worst of a hippie stereotype with a young sufferer of Attention Deficit Disorder Syndrome, devoid of focus and tranquility and desperate for an exit ramp from his or her damaged mind.

“If they’re so happy, why do none of them seem to have taken a bath in six years,” Filer asked Boorstin the hissing cockroach and put his feet up on Max’s couch as if he was about to take a nap. Naptime would have hit the spot right now but he was certainly otherwise occupied at the moment. The Osho tape had riled him for some reason. He needed to clear himself of some of the more toxic imagery he perceived swirling around in there just outside the main action of grinning human Cheshires empty of anything but the will to sing praises of an objectively evil man.

If one paused the action on a particular frame, entirely naked children could be perceived squatting down on the floorboards of one of the ashrams (or whatever the fuck it was they were in at the moment) digging their fingers into dingy crevices.

“I’ve heard all about this sort,” Anthony Filer told Boorstin not tilting up his head to see to where his pet had strayed. He fast forwarded the tape to a different place altogether. Here the orange clad masses were in the midst of their so-called dynamic mediation swaying all about and hyperventilating due to the breath exercises that were engaged in during the activity. They didn’t seem at peace with the world at the moment but there you have an outsider’s subjective opinion. They were all about seemingly throwing caution to the wind during this exercise. They likely couldn’t describe what they felt if they were pressed repeatedly to do so.

Look, it’s too bad people had to behave in this manner to seemingly gain some peace of mind for themselves. There was a need to believe that went unsatisfied for the

most part with so many. People were tired of living with free will. They needed the comfort that escape from moral responsibility brought them.

Having found the scent into the bathtub beyond, Boorstin the roach too found for himself a heaven of sorts absent of free will in the seared opened tissue along Max Schein rictus mouth.

*Tcchtt tcccht tccchhht* spoke Boorstin the bug. Which meant among other things “my purpose in life is served.” Its papules dilated then opened. Soon its eggs poured into the presently dry and open crevice of Max’s opened mouth. Just then another suppliant was encountering God. It was fortuitous meeting for one of them. For one of them there was not a damn good thing about it that one could say truthfully even if one had so desired to do just that and forever.

# Chapter Seven → (March 25, 1997)

In this part of North Hollywood so many of the habitués of Vineland Avenue had taken to wearing red neckerchiefs with the half-Windsor knots front-facing in order to cover their equally knotty Adam's apples.

"They're all so sad about Roy Rogers, about his recent passing from the world," an emaciated but still hyper Jack Hameister told his meth dealer, Peter Square, from his tenuous position on the number twenty bus stop bench, that somehow couldn't contain his skeletal frame no matter how much Jack concentrated.

Deep in the shadow of the twenty foot metal clown (that beat on a drum perpetually and never made a sound all the while) in Circus Liquors' parking lot, the objects in Jack's immediate surroundings was constantly shifting on him for some reason, tilting on him, rearranging in some difficult-to-grasp pattern that forced Jack to constantly re-orient himself to their latest configuration. He didn't know how this could be but he suspected it had something to do with his constant ice smoking. Such a habit rooted a man in place but gave the world around him magical properties. Every so often, for example, the clown would stare down at Jack and threaten him with the drumstick. He wanted Hameister removed from the immediate vicinity, his turf, apparently. But fuck him. This was still a free country. He

could do his worst for all Jack cared. He didn't have a name like Jack had. He didn't have a social security number or birth certificate. Unlike Jack Hameister, he wasn't a citizen of these United States.

This nefarious-looking mascot, the clown that is, kept constant watch on so many of the denizens of North Hollywood down below as if they were its bland progeny divorced from their circus origins. Depending on the time of day the shadow of the great clown's perpetually drum-beating arm either pointed West toward the ocean at the edge of the continent or east toward the Verdugo no-man's-land, where sixteen months ago, equipped with only a backpack, a pistol, a glad bag filled with yellowy meth of dubious quality stolen from a former friend, and a leaky pup tent, Jack Hameister had lived on-the-lam (to use the colloquial expression) and in constant fear of arrest.

That was to say, the clown was pointing either west to Jack's never realized beachfront home in Malibu, or east to the Verdugo on the Mojave's western lip, Jack's present and future reality.

"I sat there and baked and burned," was how he described the experience to Peter Square once of his interment in those desertified mountains. Never in a million years would Jack have imagined himself consigned to such a place for such a long period. He had always been, in his own mind, a winner. But shit like this happened to a man when he was constantly seeking out a chemical high to salve the wounds that life imprinted on him slowly. Eventually Jack had been able to nickname hundreds of the Verdugo's cacti, dozens of its coyotes, several of the intertwined wakes of buzzards whose sinister presence was seldom welcomed by Jack, and the plentiful red and orange basalt formations that rose from the badland's thin black soil as if the ashen byproduct of an ancient conflagration. So that it might as well have been a chthonian nightmare vision that he was perceiving, less a cool accounting of the so-called here and now.

Roy Rogers, it should be said, once starred in a movie partially shot in the Verdugos, 1944's *Hollywood Canteen*. It was a forgettable performance for the most part by the former Leonard Franklin Slye. They gave him a Cole Porter song to croon and he made a hash of it. Roy Rogers was no

Bing Crosby. But sometimes he had a way of drawing you into a lyric:

*I want to ride to the ridge where the west commences/*
*And gaze at the moon until I lose my senses/*
*I can't look at hobbles and I can't stand fences/*
*Don't fence me in!*

"You and your degenerate cohorts," Peter Square said to Jack looking around at the other human detritus both in and along this street, "don't seem like typical Roy Rogers aficionados."

Indeed, most of these men of Vineland Avenue presently didn't have the intellectual wattage to recall what, if anything, they had eaten for breakfast, let alone have been able to cultivate an interest in a former Hollywood icon, presently a cult figure, who was subject to a bit of ironic appreciation from a burgeoning musical scene of west coast-based hipsters that prized vintage and earnestness over competence and relevance. Increasingly in the new and presently unreliable medium of the Internet file sharing service, Audiogalaxy, Roy's tunes would be downloaded en masse. The users dug him supposedly. His songs spoke to them in a way any post-grunge musical assemblage could not:

*Let me be by myself in the evening breeze/*
*Listen to the murmur of the cottonwood trees/*
*Send me off forever but I ask you please/*
*Don't fence me in*

"They know Roy Rogers as a spiritual force, I'd say, more than a single person," Jack told Peter. "Not by name," he said, "but by feeling. Not by personal identity, but by the aura he gave off when he was here with us on the terrestrial plane. One of a kind, I'd say," he said, "except for all those like him. Gene Autry was one of those like Roy and I can't tell them apart. But I don't think (and you can correct me if I'm wrong) Gene ever wore a red neckerchief himself. He had a way with a song, too. But I can't seem to remember a single word Gene Autry ever warbled, to either his missus or his goddamn horse, whatshisname, what with the floppy ears, his cancer of the colon, and the birthmark on its head like Cain himself:"

*Just turn me loose let me straddle my old saddle/*
*Underneath the western skies/*
*On my cayuse let me wander over yonder/*
*Till I see the mountain rise*

Poll these wretches for the real reason regarding their arcane fashion choice, they would, if their guard was sufficiently lowered by a rock's lingering after affects or the semi-starvation that the meth-head lifestyle encouraged, tell you that, of late, the appearance of the ubiquitous skin lesions or "ice burns" so-called, caused by the poor circulation (that was in turned caused by meth's wreaking havoc on the body's regulatory mechanisms), had constituted, in the eyes of one overzealous Basin judge, sufficient probable cause to execute a bodily search (including cavity check) for possession of illegal narcotics. So what a user had to do when out in public was wear long sleeve shirts and keep his or her hands in his or her pockets for all hours of the day in addition to donning the neckerchiefs. The ice burns tended to form along the neck and face simply because that's where users tended to scratch when they were high, black beetles everywhere just below, but that's where they tended to scratch. And invariably the skin would open up like the Red Sea in front of Charlton Heston and you'd have your ice burn.

The cops supposedly weren't allowed to lift up a man's clothes before they decided to search. A misguided homeless rights group one morning had passed out the red neckerchiefs to the habitués of Vineland Avenue. They provided the Roy Rogers tribute story as a snarky bit of hipster cover to sing to the cops. The small problem was that at this moment in 1997 both Roy Rogers and Dale Evans were very much alive. They had four acres in Pacific Palisades exactly three miles from their friends the Reagans of Bel-Air. They had a taxidermied version of Roy's beloved steed Trigger on-display in their five hundred square foot master bedroom. It stood on a raised marble floor overlooking the roiling ocean. Inhabited with cool plastic dead horse eyes, Trigger gave neither Roy nor Dale the motherfucking time of day.

Pre-Google, nobody easily could check on such niggling details. So it seemed Jack and his fellow meth zombies

were free to, as Aleister Crowley once put it, “let do as thou wilt be the whole of the law.”

“He tried to fuck us over,” Jack said of the law-and-order LA county judge who of late had taken to holding court with an unloaded Magnum .357 strapped to the outside of his robes for all to see upon entering and exiting his court somewhere in the bowels of a Northridge administrative complex. Probably the neckerchiefs were not long for this world as the ACLU was already appealing the judge’s decision to an especially liberal appeals court in Sacramento. They didn’t seem to have much connection to Vineland’s meth zombies except to foil the efforts of peace enforcement. Maybe act as a type of ersatz bandage for the wounds it obscured underneath it. Meth zombies were notoriously unfashionable. Maybe the healing process should be spurred on just slightly.

Truth be told, the residents of Vineland Avenue didn’t care so much really about the healing process, whether for those topical lesions that bloomed predictably whenever the local meth supply was replenished or for the deeper hidden lesions that drove them to an addict’s life from the start. The zombies were impervious to so much discomfort and reveled in the imperviousness, almost as if it was a secondary goal of their elemental lifestyle. They could endure pain and degradation that would send normal folk either to the ER, the psychiatrist’s couch, or the social worker’s cubicle to petition for relief from their suffering. They slept on glass many of them, and laughed at the intrusion of steel-toed Dr. Martens, or the ersatz police batons, or the gobs of spit launched in their direction from concerned citizens of all ages, ethnicities, and party affiliations whenever it seemed they had the opportunities to do so. Broken ribs, the not infrequent bouts of projectile vomiting and diarrhea caused by smoking too much, scabies, the night terrors that often occurred in spontaneous jags lasting twenty minutes a throw, the holy visions of the nameless meth Gods with putrescent rectums for mouths and curved paper cuts for eyes, the bad breath, the shallow breath (no breath sometimes when the body had had enough of the outrages it was subject to and tried to give up its ghost prematurely), Heps, A, B, and, especially, C (that newfound scourge of a hundred million

hedonists), and, above all, a desperate sense that one's life was not one's own anymore, distracted a Vineland Avenue dweller barely at all in the completing of his appointed rounds. This was what it meant to be drug-addicted. They felt being inured to physical suffering was their superpower, their birthright, their edge against the world. They didn't give a shit about what was good for them, ever. They didn't see the point of applying a dressing to an open wound, for example, because to them the infection that resulted from the wound's neglect was proof of the existence of the dark God with its rectal mouth that they all bowed down to, night and day, until their mutual end came.

A tooth, a left front molar had come loose in Jack's dreamless sleep, and he paused momentarily in his denunciation of the Magnum-packing judge when attempting alternately to push the goddamn thing back in to the necrotic mush of his gum line and twist it out of there betwixt thumb and forefinger with a constant gentle pressure.

"What I was about to say," he said to Peter Square, "was that freedom is what it's all about. Because as Roy Rogers—and I'm quoting here from memory—once said himself, 'don't fence me in. Let me ride out to the corner of the earth until my fucking horse falls off the edge. No fences. Don't fence me in, bra.' You know the sound of that noise. The sound of the horse falling off the end of the fucking world. A nd what I'm saying to you and that fascist judge is don't even put a fucking fence near where I can see. I want to live free."

But though he wouldn't admit it, freedom in general was a deeply problematic concept for an addict like Jack Hameister. Because the freedom which Peru, Indiana's favorite son was extolling in the song was, strictly speaking, the cause of his near constant physical torment presently.

Freedom had led to Jack's imprisonment and subsequent torture in a prison of his own putrescent flesh. Impossible for one so presently addled like Jack to ever fully resolve the paradox, or seeming paradox, which was why, perhaps, a completely reformed drug addict was a deeply rare occurrence.

A man struggled to be free of his disease. Which was to say, he struggled to be free, period. But this raging

against the dictates of the flesh only caused the prison walls to reform about him later.

The physical abnegation required to be truly free of the chains of this world were curiously missing from the philosophical appetites of the West. Buddhists, for example, didn't see any paradox at all in the body's cruel betrayals of the spirit. They understood it as an inevitable occurrence of being alive.

Cartesian dualism was a useless concept really while in the grips of a drug dependency. Absent of true satori, one never rose above the body's sad circumstances. One was, therefore, one thought. Not the other way around.

Look, there were (likely) precious few hardcore junkies in university philosophy departments. And, therefore, the comfort of philosophy was largely absent from places like North Hollywood's Vineland Avenue where exhortations to become a master of one's own fate would, if it were uttered by an outsider, be treated as a type of bleak ironic statement as opposed to the sage advice it was likely meant as.

Go ahead and hold a flame underneath your hand close enough so that a blister starts to form. Now, consider whether you possessed the ability to hold it there as long as you want. Honesty compelled you to consider the reality that all willpower failed in the presence of true physical misery. Indeed, no experienced meth user ever believed that they could quit anytime they wanted. Meth wasn't heroin certainly in that regard, and it certainly wasn't alcohol. With the meth user it seldom progressed to the point where the withdrawal symptoms started in earnest. Arrest and death generally were the only avenues available to those meth addicts desirous to be rid of their problem. With meth there's no rock bottom to hit to push up against toward the light. Or maybe for the average user, rock bottom was so deep as to be impossible to sink to before death intervened and then, there you go, you're free regardless.

Dying was not an unhappy thing to have to endure. As when a man was in meth's grip he was more or less lost to the world regardless. Years before winding up in North Hollywood, for example, Jack Hameister had developed a hankering for blow. But even when snorting lines off his

filthy office desk blotter seconds before a client entered, he felt himself possessed of enough self-awareness to be able to defer the buzz for minutes at a time.

"If I wanted to stop I could have stopped," he told Peter Square of his former days as a more or less discreet coke head down in LA. Likely a bit of self-deception this, as, after all, merely theorizing about a bit of never applied self-restraint was the same as claiming for oneself the ability to prove Fermat's Last Theorem if only one had "really tried." But Jack's point to Peter was that at least with cocaine the delusion of self-control was present. With ice, it was impossible to even consider kicking even on an experimental basis just to prove you could. Whereas coke addiction was like running down a steep gradient at full speed, addiction to meth was like being pushed out of an airplane without a parachute. Stopping wasn't going to happen ever, which in a way was a blessing, as all these false notions of normalcy that various other drug addicts were able to cultivate inside themselves for sometimes decades was mercifully absent in this situation. It was deeply annoying for a relatively grounded person like Hameister to engage in this kind of self-deception for a prolonged period. It was the most annoying thing to have to lie to yourself so continuously that a type of self-hypnosis took place eventually and all self-awareness was lost. Jack wasn't so uptight that he cringed at his ability to manipulate himself in this way. But the good thing about ice-slavery was the definitive sense of helplessness it imposed upon its victims. All things being equal he wished he could have skipped cocaine addiction altogether. He had no desire to relive this period. He didn't see where it made sense to do so.

The other problem with coke was that it tended to foster the type of reckless grandiosity that led to a consignment in the Verdugos for months on end.

"I had big plans," Jack said to Peter Square speaking of his former intoxicated self and probed at the striated rows of scar tissue starting at his right shoulder flowing down to his exposed chest.

Always with such inflated, drug-fueled schemes, the gap between what was likely and what was merely possible was so enormous that it was doomed to failure in advance.

“I conceived of a Mexican hideout,” Jack said to Peter Square, articulating one part of the plan “somewhere down in Cabo San Lucas in Monterrey.”

Being literally out of his fucking mind when he thought of it, however, the logistics of obtaining such a cozy end for himself had proven elusive for the former investigative reporter who had once prided himself on the knowledge of the way the world really worked.

When you became a wanted man, for example, the difficulties that you experienced when trying to access your bank accounts or any type of financial resource proved daunting enough to forestall any type of cozy escape into the Mexican Riviera.

“Cops would have been there waiting for me when I arrived,” Jack said to Square, not inaccurately, about his dreamed-of Cabo escape. Indeed, the notion of taking refuge from U.S. law enforcement in a Mexican hacienda had proven so popular amongst the criminal populations of southern California that in 1995 the FBI, unbeknownst to Jack, had opened several offices in the Monterrey peninsula specializing in the apprehending of fugitives from American justice. Cabo would have been the first place they would have looked for him if he had made it across the border. It was a criminal cliché really. And one which those of any real knowledge of how to operate when one had been designated a Person of Interest in a criminal investigation would never have considered as an option for themselves. Jack Hameister always considered himself a smart guy. But here he was making a dumb mistake. And looking back all he had to offer in his own defense was that he had done too much blow. It tended to make a man elide details entirely when formulating a plan of action. It tended to give him a crazy confidence that was entirely unwarranted if he was able to rationally analyze his circumstances in any sort of extended way.

Lucky for him—though this was a deeply ironic way of putting it—Hameister was forced to linger in the Basin for a while after the cops first raid in his office in order to collect on a debt accrued for services rendered. The second cashier’s check that he had been handed by Khan had turned out to be fraudulent. And he had needed to try to make good with his own accounting about what he should

have been paid to begin with. He assumed that once confronted, this highfalutin' welsher, Professor Khan, would pay up. After all he knew exactly what Jack was capable of. Small of bearing, Khan didn't seem the type who would offer resistance in the face of a credible threat of violence. He seemed deeply smug and unprepared to mount any sort of self-defense in the presence of somebody who had every motivation to hurt him if a suitable apology (amongst other things) wasn't offered quickly.

Jack Hameister had performed a vile act on behalf of Maidul Khan and quite frankly the last thing he had expected was to be cheated by him when it came time to settle accounts.

"I was going to fucking kill him straight off after he paid me," Jack said to Peter Square of the swindler in whose employ he had been engaged temporarily. He didn't understand why Khan didn't understand why this was so.

It was only halfway through taking a knife to his hirsute face that Jack began to understand that this was the outcome Khan had desired all along. Everything else was prelude. Khan had no further desire whatsoever anymore to extend his life into old age. For reasons at the time that were unknown to Jack, he had no desire to be remembered as anything more than a murder victim who had died at the hands of a man he had never met before.

A professor of philosophy who had over constant immersion in his field come to realize that the subject was a grandiloquent fraud, a mere bit of misdirection executed for the benefit of the ruling elites who rightly saw their own deeds too unseemly to be given to posterity devoid of an explanatory subtext.

"He told me Adolph Hitler was obsessed by philosophy," Jack in turn told Peter Square, who, it should be admitted, couldn't care less. "He said the subject was all a fraud. All philosophy was merely an extended apology for violence against people who were not rich enough to buy philosophers of their own."

If you wanted to take over a country, for example, and enslave a people, a philosopher could be acquired along the way. He would argue that the enslaved were better off subjugated than free, as freedom would only confuse them and lead to all sort of bad decisions on their part and make

them deeply unhappy at best and dead at worst. Maybe a bought philosopher would simply deconstruct the notion of freedom itself and question if there ever was such a thing. Therefore, it would be nothing to have one's freedom taken away. As one quite literally was taking away nothing and maybe not even completely anyway.

Heidegger needed Hitler but probably it was not so true the other way around.

Intellectual justifications for monstrous actions was a mere game anyway, Maidul Khan knew, a perfume in the abattoir, but also a type of tranquilizer for the masses as well, given to the sort of people, the haute bourgeois as identified by Marx, who were in a position to question authority and needed to be attended to early on. This was what elite universities were for. The official version of an intellectual legacy needed to be given unto the next generation of lawyers and politicians and TV talking heads in a form largely unsullied by truth. Their high status needed to be flattered and reinforced by constantly suggesting that they were the succulent fruit brought forth by thousands of years of democracy and rationalism. They needed to be instructed to question all authority except the authority of that philosophical tradition that had sanctioned so many of the totalitarian impulses that these children were being taught to revile. A PR flack, your average philosopher Khan thought. Your average intellectual giant, literary lion, "human rights activist," employed by a succession of increasingly cruel kings. Absent of any real integrity or dispassion, a pseudo-scientist, the philosopher, asking open-ended questions about society and existence, intentionally unresolved, putting people to sleep as he went.

So the only just act of such men after a lifetime of excuse-making for moral monsters (and those men who aspired to moral monstrosity), was to execute a violent self-abnegation, if not by their own hands then by the hands of some other desperate apparatchik (shmuck, loser, dope fiend) who could be lured into the act for all the wrong reasons.

"She needed to be shunned," Jack recalled Maidul Khan explaining to him about the reasons behind his desire to see his daughter disfigured. He was explaining his motives

to Jack as a sort of concession to him in lieu of payment. For the past ten minutes that darling knife of Jack Hameister's had been pressed against Maidul Khan's throat demanding entry to the sub-cutaneous layers of tissue and blood sinew and bone. But Jack was convinced Khan had told him this not out of fear for his own life but out of pity for Jack's. He didn't see Jack as anything but an animal. And presently an animal in a great deal of psychological pain.

Jack wasn't so intellectually evolved in the manner of Maidul Khan. He still clung mightily to his own fears, illusions, and obsessions. He had been used by Khan and at the very least he felt he was entitled to know the reason why. Khan had been bored throughout this interrogation and, despite all his philosophical training, slightly nervous as he walked a tightrope on the lip of the abyss. He was eager for the drama to be at an end. All this animal gnashing of teeth and screaming and threats and physicality was proving deeply unpleasant for him. So he was prepared to throw Jack a bone just to get it over with.

Proving himself to be less adept a knife wielding murderer than even an acid thrower (please see the scars along his chest and shoulders for evidence that this was so), it took the better part of an hour for him to dispatch Maidul Khan with the knife. Such slowness emerging, contrary to all appearances, not from a latent sadism that emerged in Hameister at the moment of crisis, so much as a simple ignorance about what he was doing: where to stick the knife's business end and have this small man quit his involuntary thrashing and quietly go into shock and bleed out in the space of a few minutes. He thought it a good idea to stab Khan in the cheek, for example, as if this area contained a series of vital organs that once pierced would rapidly put an end to Khan and his annoying and likely involuntary attempts at self-defense.

"It stuck in there," Jack recalled for Peter Square of the knife attack in the wistful tones that less dissipated folk would use to describe a particular beach holiday activity, maybe a bonfire constructed at low tide, or a spectacular sunset on placid waters viewed from a rented house's wraparound wooden porch. Probably the blade's edge had lodged between two molars and was requiring a fair bit of

force to free it. Holding Khan under his office desk, he was finally forced to pull it out of there with both hands, like Arthur removing Excalibur from its clutching stone.

In retrospect, this unintentional torture served Khan right. But just then Jack was as horrified about his actions as any observer would have been, bearing witness to a UCLA professor being murdered by a depraved-looking outsider in the professor's book lined office. Nobody would ever be able to connect the dots in this matter and see that Khan was being given his just desserts. All the rows of books and the Pashtun tapestries that lined the office walls acted as a type of inadvertent soundproofing. Thus, Jack's escape was enabled. Khan was apparently not popular with his students and it would be hours before he would be discovered by the building's cleaning crew. *She needed to be shunned* was, as it turned out, the last cogent sentence Khan ever uttered. Everything else was so much gasping for air, entreaties to stop, entreaties to start, and the odd curse aimed toward God, spoken in his native tongue. As this seemed to be a deeply unsatisfying end for him despite that, really, it had all gone according to Hoyle.

The true crime of Khan's daughter Menen as far as Jack could ascertain from Khan's final reminiscences was that she was too much like him in too many essential ways. She too was seemingly caught up in the intellectual enterprise that in Khan's view only served to alienate those who should by rights benefit from it solely.

"Nigger worship," was how he characterized Menen's scholarship to Jack, invoking the name Gihanga as a strict pejorative. The stated reason why he didn't seek her death, merely her disfigurement, was that Maidul assumed Menen was capable of learning from her mistakes and providing the world with sufficient penance regarding the nonsense she had brought into it. She seemed to love this mystical Gihanga, Khan realized, as far as he could deduce from her writings. And this in his view was the greatest crime of which she was capable. She almost seemed on the forefront of starting a new religion or at least conceiving of the rudiments of one if somebody else was willing to take up the flag and start it themselves. This religion would have nothing to do with Allah certainly. And although he had been loath to admit it even to himself

Professor Khan now saw his revulsion at Menen's continued success to be rooted in his country's old ways, which was a fiercely institutionalized misogyny whose exterior was gilded with Islamic fundamentalism almost as an afterthought. Without it, he probably would have still hated her and even tried to do her harm. But the bloodlust wouldn't have risen to the level of tribal fierceness that he could now admit in his final minutes that the acid attack represented.

Maidul Khan wasn't a bad guy underneath it all, Jack thought, just after he knifed him. But, look: there was a sickness that had been let loose in the world on his behalf. And he was the only person (at least in his estimation) with enough awareness of the situation to make a real difference. Somebody had to be stern with society, brutal with it almost, while performing the necessary task of reminding those who seemed to benefit so greatly from society's excesses that they too were mortal and could at an instant be swept from existence in an eye blink. Didn't matter what sort of collateral damage was created along the way, as Khan had long since progressed through mere notions of justice and into something far more vindictive and God-like altogether. As long it got the job done it didn't matter to him who got hurt. Nobody was innocent anymore in his estimation. And so before he was too old to be able to force his will upon others, he felt the need to get things rolling in earnest.

Once Khan was dead, all this had been made clear to Jack.

"Right there and then," he said, "I made up my mind definitely that if I escaped justice I would try to get into rehab."

The bench was shifting underneath him once more so he had to steady himself before he continued.

"Thank God it was just a passing phase."

More than experiencing a change of heart, however, Jack's vow proved simply unworkable for him. Because before he could take steps to clean himself up he was halfway through the Verdugo far off the dusty central path maintained by park rangers, obsessed with the scorpions that supposedly called the area's topsoil home (an urban myth), and trying to repair the hole in his pup tent even

though the area received less than ten inches of rain per year on average. Straight from Maidul's office in Westwood, Jack had gone northeast rather than due south as he had assumed, incorrectly, that an APB had been issued for his arrest. He hadn't thought things through especially well as usual. He was a smart man generally but the foothill of coke he had snorted over the years had long since short-circuited his brain. He hadn't realized that Khan had had every reason to be discreet about their relationship. Khan hadn't left so much as a single scrawled word that alluded to Jack's participation in the crime against his daughter. He had no confidants to speak of. His only living relative in this country was his daughter Menen, who, it could be inferred from pursuant events, was estranged from her father and wouldn't be anybody he would confide in for any matter at all.

Also by the time he had hit the black mountains, Hameister had had in his possession that glad bag full of ice that he had ripped off from the glove compartment of a hit and run on LaBrea Avenue the day before. So there went his vow of sobriety more or less as a stroke of luck.

"I had the ice, but back then I didn't know how to smoke it or how much," he said to Peter Square who had brightened considerably at the conversation's amenable turn. Here was the usual swaggering bullshit between dealer and client that he was able to participate in fully without the sense that he was being set-up by a narc wearing a wire. Too much dark shit having been kicked about such as knife blades stuck in molars. Now the Jack Hameister that Peter Square knew was once more before him. Just another hooked loser telling war stories to his ever patient supplier. Unlike his largely brusque colleagues, Peter liked to be sociable during his sales calls if only to show somebody watching from a distance with a telephoto lens that everything was copasetic at the moment. Here they were, just two dudes engaging in a casual convo about matters that would seem, if you could judge only by their body language, entirely run of the mill and devoid of extra-legal intent completely. Change "ice" to "absinthe" let's say, and "smoke" to "drink" and you'd have what passed for an innocent recollection of weekend frolics in this day and age. Peter's modus operandi while

dealing was to always act casual until the moment that the physical exchange took place. Paranoid past redemption due to the unavoidable psychological pressures associated with his chosen profession, Peter was convinced against all reason that groups of overzealous DEA agents armed with telescopes and listening devices were crouched in street-parked cars even now waiting for the right moment to swoop in. Why they would wait until they caught him in the act, as opposed to simply trailing him to his lab and taking down the whole operation at a swoop was a question he perpetually struggled with. Whenever he felt their enhanced gazes on him, refastening telephoto lenses unto video cameras through heavily tinted windows somewhere across the busy streets that he preferred to work, he asked himself this question. Probably they were fucking with him merely, just making him sweat for their own sadistic satisfaction prior to the last possible moment that they could bust him and make the charges stick. Or maybe they were waiting for him to lure in bigger fish altogether. He didn't have real insights into cops' thought processes. Their motivations were the stuff of mordant speculation for the community of meth dealers and users from San Bernardino County west. Maybe they were simply looking to squeeze him for a bribe. They wanted to soften him up first psychologically. Or maybe they were simple evil motherfuckers who did whatever they wanted ignoring both law and commerce entirely. In this latter case the reasons behind their actions would be entirely untranslatable. You asked them to their faces why they did what they did and they wouldn't have an answer for you. Couldn't answer it for you, as they were entirely devoid of self-awareness. They were motherfucking animals. They felt an itch and so they scratched. So there was no reason to worry about it. But somehow that's all Peter could think about at all hours of the day. He wasn't their bitch no matter what they did to prove him wrong. But somehow the truth of this statement was always eluding Peter at exactly the wrong time.

Don't look to your tormentors for either companionship or any sort of understanding once they have you dead to rights. Peter Square was experienced enough to know this. And this was another reason why he tended to linger with

his clients out in the open instead of, in the manner of most dealers, conducting their business behind closed doors. Nowadays such transactions were one of the few outlets for genuine human contact that Square could afford to expose himself to. If he hadn't gotten out and about and made these types of house calls with his clients, he might never have the opportunity to talk to another human being except for his girlfriend and business partner, Vanessa. And 'Nessa was of late not such pleasant company. Constantly she was encouraging Peter to remove himself from their homestead on the Mojave's western edge and cultivate more clients. His fidgetiness and paranoia infected her regularly. It caused her untold misery according to her during the long days and occasional nights spent in their converted barn cooking the product that had over time become their sole source of income.

'Nessa didn't want Peter hovering around the barn with his hazmat mask half askew constantly asking her when the latest batch of crystals would have formed. The ice would be done when it's done. She was tired of saying the same goddamn thing to him constantly. She didn't understand what his malfunction was in this capacity. All this hurry-uppity-ness. She hadn't yet heard his theories about the conduct of DEA agents with their telephoto lenses and sadistic ways. She didn't understand why he was constantly on edge. Was he a user? No. She assumed, therefore, he was merely getting cold feet about the operation. She assumed at some point he would have to be confronted with the evidence of what she could only conceptualize as his weakness. At that point they would either have to go their separate ways or she would have to fuck him over. Presently she was leaning toward option two. Scariest bitch you'd ever want to meet according to her. She didn't know how hard she was in reality. But she was eager to find out.

Vanessa Doubet (French Canadian. Pronounced *doubt*) presently wasn't so well-versed in the logistics of murder that she would ever attempt to dispatch Peter Square by herself. Her plan had always been to bring in a third partner at a crucial juncture and squeeze Peter out by degrees. Eventually there would be no need for him. After which they could just tell him to fuck off. Or maybe put a

bullet in him after they made him dig his own Mojave grave in the manner of the gangsters in Martin Scorsese's underrated *Casino*. Same desert, different state. It was a film both she and Peter appreciated enough to keep on laser disc for moments when their resolve faltered. During such times they (well, Peter mostly) entertained ideas of driving to Indianapolis absent of their cooking equipment to find work in the culinary industry.

For now, things had reached a point of stasis between them. Almost subconsciously, Peter was suppressing the need to act out his anxiety in front of her. Nowadays direct communication with each other was constantly expressed as ironic discourse about masculine and feminine roles. They pantomimed what they felt to be normal marital roles with a smooch hello and goodbye. There was all sort of willfully idiotic small talk on-going. They were *Seinfeld* fans and Ween fans. They wanted to live between a pair of quotation marks. It's the way the pop culture rolled in the late nineties. The culture felt it had cracked a code. It assured consumers everything would be different from now on.

The room where they kept the mattress where they stuffed their ill-gotten hard currency was padlocked most hours of the day. They had learned progressively not to speak of money matters during certain hours. They had begun to compartmentalize various unpleasant states of existence in the manner of real couples. And sometimes in front of each other they would wonder why it was neither of them had been to the bank in several years. Wide-eyed they would wonder at the reason for the semi-automatic pistols on either side of their king-sized bed.

As per what they imagined the ritual was with normal couples, Peter and Vanessa were headed down to Disneyland later in the day, then south for a Tijuana shopping spree.

"My lady's the one who taught me all about the business," Peter said to Jack recalling the subject at hand. She in turn had learned about meth production from an ex-boyfriend who was a member of the Mongols biker gang of San Berdoo. They're the ones supposedly who had started circulating ice in California. The FBI had long since intervened with them. From them she learned the

production techniques and the profit margin. From them she learned that she should not try to sell the shit herself as this was by far the most dangerous part of the business. She had seen the wired state the drug left its users in and the desire that affected them whenever they were in proximity to the product. She had heard all the war stories from Mongol soldiers about being jacked in back alleys and having to fight their way out.

Prior to dealing ice, Peter Square had dealt pot from his small apartment in Toluca Lake.

“I thought it would be a similar type of vibe,” he told Jack who had lately grown vacant-eyed and restless. He wanted his fix obviously but was prepared at least for several more minutes to wait Peter Square out. This delaying of gratification was a type of ingrained instinct that most dealers possessed. Made the dogs hungrier. No reason now to take Jack’s hundred and twenty bucks. And since Jack had taken to bullshitting concerning his adventures with sulfuric acid, it seemed turnabout was fair play. Peter hadn’t realized that he had hit a wall in his own ability to put up with users’ small talk while in the presence of ice.

For himself, presently Jack had small black beetles crawling under his skin. He knew enough to keep his cool regardless in his dealer’s presence. Presently Peter Square was his solitary contact. If he left he would be forced to do something drastic. He didn’t know what exactly but something that had a serrated-edge-to-it-drastic. First step likely would be to start robbing others for their stashes. No problem there at least morally. He would have to scope out the houses where other meth heads lived which was not such a hard task either. Maybe do the familiar burn where you pretended you were a plainclothes narcotics officer. The typical head would do anything short of flushing their stash down the crapper. Suck your dick if you split it with them fifty-fifty. They were always reliable. Their first instinct would be to smoke the shit up before the door got kicked in which would leave them paralyzed and probably unconscious for the better of an hour and then Jack could just go right in and imbibe.

The pot Peter used to sell had a Humboldt County origin. It went mainly to the frat boys, Seven-Eleven

employees, and assistant professors that comprised his social circle at the time. He lived in Pomona near Cal-Poly. In those days, he rarely left his apartment.

"It was just a kind of fast food type of existence, like working at the drive-thru," Peter said recalling those days as a single, homogeneous experience. "I had an apartment that I stayed in the whole day and slipped the pot under the front door. Barricaded myself in there basically. I thought this was the correct way to proceed. I thought I found a loophole in the law. That this was permissible as long as there was no direct contact made with a buyer. You could claim it was all a coincidence basically. Or you could claim you didn't know the purpose of whoever it was on the other side of the door. At worst the distributing charge would be downgraded to simple possession because there would be no direct contact made with the client."

A faulty knowledge of the law was at play here assuredly because the arrest warrant that eventually had been lodged against Peter's name had likewise been slipped under the front door by the smart ass cop who had lived next door. He had gotten sick of all the foot traffic in the apartment hallway. The search warrant on the other hand the cop had kept on his person the whole time. Peter's apartment was inspected item by item in an attempt to discover something more significant than the third of a brick of weed that they had discovered on his coffee table on top of a decade old *Atlantic Monthly* whose cover was a cartoon image of Henry Kissinger. Super K, Dr. K to the rescue, drawn with an angelic halo tossed over the tines of a red pitchfork held in Dr. K's hairy right paw.

In those days you didn't do any time for a first time drug offense. Nevertheless, the message was delivered to Peter Square that his present mode of operation was woefully in need of an upgrade.

He had never thought of how the neighbors would react to all the foot traffic. So eventually he became entirely mobile in his operations. Made house calls so to speak. But these were always performed with the idea that it would be safer for him. A second drug felony conviction lodged against you in California would likely result in an eighteen month stint in county jail. And then there was always the possibility that the DA would make something of

the fact that you were also involved in methamphetamine production, invoke the RICO statutes to conjure up an affiliation with organized crime and attempt to ship your ass to Chino, or Folsom, or Pelican Bay, or some other similar Golden State hellhole for a twelve year stint to exist as some AB's or BGFer's personal property slash cum receptacle. Along with ninety eight, ninety nine percent of his fellow human beings, Peter Square was not cut out for the medium-maximum security prison life which basically demanded a fealty to a long dis-remembered warrior creed if one was to do anything more than despair, suffer, and die in there and in that order. He knew what his vulnerabilities would be while in the clutches of the American justice system's darkest confines. He had a punk's heart and a punk's head. So he was trying to hedge his bets regarding what he was doing to justify his confinement in the first place. He had a plan already to narc on Vanessa and turn state's evidence against the Mongols if threatened with serious time. Not the smartest way a man could continue to remain above ground continuously, narcing on the Mongols, but fear made a man act injudiciously. He didn't want to be anybody's punk ever. He'd do anything short of quitting the business altogether to avoid an extended stretch in a place like Pelican Bay.

Square was addicted to the money that came with the distribution of illegal narcotics. He was always looking for ways to carry on dealing even as he vowed that this latest batch he was toting around the San Fernando Valley's grimier enclaves would be his last. He needed to face facts about who he was. He needed to shut the fuck up and enjoy his prosperity while it lasted. This was Vanessa's constant refrain to him. In her view he made too much of a public spectacle of quitting. If he wanted to quit he should quit and take off to Indiana, alone. They both knew that wasn't going to happen. In the meantime he had all this disposable income. He had to know it wasn't going to last forever. So he would be better served living in the moment. But for a worry wart like Peter Square, this was a mission impossible.

Once money changed hands, Jack Hameister grew suddenly expansive. He seemed to slip between the bench's wooden slats onto the polychrome NoHo concrete

below. As if his spine had liquefied and nothing but this migration could have been allowed.

He had a glass pipe in his windbreaker's pocket. He wanted to get high immediately in the approaching shadow of the northbound SFTA #23. This was not a smart maneuver, especially at this time of day with so many solid citizens commuting unto the Valley's edge cities from places north and west. Even in this lax day and age, the behavior would have registered as offensive with so many. Some bus riders now were in possession of cellular phones. Before the bus made it to its next stop a cruiser would be breathing down both their necks.

Peter had to rehearse his story about being squeezed by the Mongols. There were facts that the cops would require. He would be caught dead to rights otherwise. He wouldn't have a convincing lie to tell anybody about who had put him up to it.

But Hameister's brains were long since fried by the methamphetamine he was busy holding up to the greenish smog-shrouded sun as if it was some sort of Chagall stain glass window requiring a Godly bit of illumination to pour through its bowels before its exquisiteness could truly be appreciated to the nth degree. He was enraptured with ice, truly. Just like they were fragments from some shattered dwelling place of the Godhead, a celestial mansion's broken cornerstone. Now he was smoking the cornerstone's shards which was the only way a wretch like him could commune with the mansion's owner. If somebody had picked up the Glad Ziploc sandwich bag the crystals had come in and chucked it down the nearest sewer grate, Jack would have thoughtlessly followed it down into the city's hidden recesses. He had long since abandoned any self-consciousness regarding his lifestyle. He could barely recall his former mostly drug-free existence as the *LA Times*' self-appointed Man of the People. He could not presently understand presently the motivations behind that mysterious go-getter, the careerism and the seeming genuine interest in other people's problems as if there were some gain in this demonstrated selflessness, a meaningful award of some kind that try as he might Jack couldn't recall ever knowing about.

“If you have a hotel room nearby,” he said to Peter Square, “we can go there and party. Elsewise I can just sit here on my bony ass and stare at cloud formations. It’s up to you really,” he told him. “But if you’re asking me to go someplace with you, I might need a helping hand up. It’s something that I haven’t been diagnosed with yet but I need a helping hand. Something like lumbago. It comes and goes with me. But when I got it I got it. And then I just have to sit here for a while wait it out.”

Peter didn’t have a hotel room at the moment but Circus Liquors had a back alley.

“Here let me hold it for you,” Square said to Jack minutes taking the butane lighter from a palsied right hand that had for the past ninety seconds been doing a fandango with the owner’s palsied left. He a skinny puppy dog whose front paw had gone suddenly spastic and useless at the thought of having his tummy rubbed. Hard to say if he had been by himself how Jack would have accomplished the feat of lighting up but all these addicts had their ways. Maybe he could tape a match to the edge of a desk at a public library and light it and move the pipe underneath it with both hands. Or he could swallow a hot ember and spit it into the glass bowl quickly ignoring his own burnt flesh. One alternative might be to set fire to his bed and swivel his head around slowly to imbibe. There was no end to such inventiveness for a typical head. The manner in which they lit their pipes was never much of a subject of conversation with them. It was a fait accompli, it was in the motherfucking bag. It seemed entirely certain to Jack that it would have happened regardless of the injuries incurred along the way.

Nowadays with Jack having progressed to a certain place in his dependency, it took the consumption of almost the entire rock before the familiar glassy-eyed expression descended on him and his once shaky hands began to execute smooth half circles in the shadowy alley space in front of him. As if these were the hands of a symphony conductor providing direction to an inaudible score.

“Now I can talk in earnest,” he said to Square, once the amphetamine level in him had subsided to a point that he was in the mood to talk in earnest. With Jack nowadays his buzz lasted a quarter of an hour at the most. If he had the

necessary resources to do so he would have smoked a rock 4 times an hour. He would have bought a box of graham crackers or something for minimal sustenance and just kept on getting high in a serial way. He would tell himself this was what life was about even as his heart was preparing to explode in his chest. But he wouldn't be able to help what his body was commanding him to do. *Ego sum, ut opinor*. He would need to get high merely. At that point he wouldn't be able to tell himself that what he was doing was wrong.

Even having built up a major methamphetamine resistance, the words once they poured out of him tended to do so ignorant of one another's presence.

To those not familiar with the meth-head argot, it tended to sound like the user was suffering some sort of brain aneurysm.

The definitive patterns of speech were disrupted. Simple sentence structures were non-existent. Everything enjambed, all the words (and necessarily all the ideas) tended to be imprinted over one another like in a holograph. Neologisms were invariably created. And in the end the attempt to communicate at all given the limitations imposed would have seemed quixotic. What the fuck did anybody in such a state have to say anyway? What was on their minds that was so goddamned important that they had to go red in the face and repeat and repeat and repeat words incessantly until the message was interpreted correctly by somebody who probably could stand a fix themselves at that point, such had been their stress level at trying to translate the language of damned souls?

You know, motherfucker, spit it out.

Or don't say it at all if you can't speak to your fellow men in the way they wanted to be spoken to.

"The mask I used is still in my back pocket," Jack told Peter Square as once more he began to talk to him about the attack on Menen Khan that had taken place months before. The reason why it was still in his back pocket, was something that was entirely lost in translation. Like some faulty transistor radio, bits of pure verbal static began to enter into the circuitous flow of lingo, phonemes devoid of physical referent strung on top of each other ten or twelve at a time. Each by itself might have indicated several

words nested in amongst them. Or more likely maybe it was just Jack's tongue running ahead of any guiding intellect to tell it exactly what sounds to form actual words with, what words to make whole thoughts with and so on. His tongue was a rambunctious hound that had lately slipped its leash. Likely it would return to its master at some point. But for now it was determined to play by itself. So if you wanted to know why the mask was still in Jack's back pocket you would have to wait it out. Soon the hound would tire and then heel. And then a semi-normal give and take could be indulged in between two close acquaintances.

The reason why Hameister kept the rubber Green Goblin mask in his pocket, he eventually said, was that once he put it on he felt like nobody in this world could fuck with him ever.

"It's like it had magic powers," he said to Peter from his position there leaning against the store's green dumpster. "And then *I* had magic powers. It's like there was a spirit inside the goddamn thing and whenever I put it on I became somebody else which was a good thing, a good motherfucking thing," he said. "Because you gotta see I was not the man I am now or ever wanted to be or ever needed to be during that time or anytime ever."

If it wasn't for the mask, he claimed to Peter in language that progressively slowed to something like a normal palaver, devoid of the herky-jerky start and stops and linguistic roads to nowhere, he never would have gone through with it. He never would have walked over to Khan's daughter's apartment with the vat of acid that Lucky had procured for him. Originally he had bought the mask for the common sense purpose of disguising himself. But once trying it on in his strangely silent apartment in West Hollywood, he seemed to have no cause to pull it off of him ever.

"Maybe the day before, and all day, I would walk around with the goddamned thing fastened on," he told Peter, thinking this a relevant detail to explaining himself. "You have to know on the way over to my final destination I drove over with the thing on. I didn't know what I would say if a cop stopped me but I drove with it on. Once I put it on I was not going to take it off until I had to. I had the

bitch down on her living room floor at one point with that scrub brush of mine that I had brought along. And she was reaching for me involuntarily. I told her ‘whatever you fucking do don’t touch the mask. So help me God. Death waits for you on the other side of the mask,’ I told her. I told her whatever you think you know about the universe you know infinitely less than you think. Really believed the world would end if something happened to it, if she snuck a peak underneath it. I was out of my fucking mind at that point. Blow and adrenaline do not mix. I had no ability to tell a whim and a bright idea apart.”

The deal between Jack and Maidul Khan was to fuck his daughter up beyond recognition. So this was what he set out to do And take Polaroids of his endeavor for the proof required.

“I still have a few if you want to see,” he said to Peter then started fumbling in his jean shorts pocket for a photo. This, if true, Square thought, was unbelievably stupid. It had revealed Jack as something altogether less than the relatively bright person Peter always assumed had resided under all the layers of addiction like some sort of sleeping beauty in a kingdom abandoned of any Prince Charming. Or maybe he wanted to be caught. He wanted expiation for his sins or a similarly clichéd behavior. Likely people who claimed they wanted to get caught were merely stupid, clumsy in the planning of their criminal enterprises. They created the rationalization for themselves long after they’d been apprehended.

The bitch had been moving around according to Jack during the attack. So what he had to do was to club her with one of the heavy African canes that was in her apartment and kneel on top of her. He had brought a scrub brush with him to help him with his (literal) defacement of her. He had thought of everything really. Or the mask had. Except for destroying the motherfucking evidence that attached him to the crime in the first place. Again, he had wanted to be caught. Or the mask had wanted him to be caught. Or maybe—and this was Square’s theory about the event—all the ice had made Jack Hameister semi-retarded and he had simply made a huge mistake.

If you want to know what Menen Khan had uttered in her still half-conscious state, it was something to the effect that she knew exactly who Jack was.

“She said, ‘I know who you are,’ then passed out,” he told Peter. Trying to fuck with his melon apparently. Or trying to get him to do something that he was unwilling to do which was finish her off. But the way she said it made Jack think that she knew exactly of what she spoke. Maybe she had mistaken him for somebody else merely. Or maybe she possessed that weird sort of insight that could be expected to descend upon all desperate souls seconds before their death. It was at that moment when the curtains of existence are reputed to swing wide open and all secrets are available for ordinary inspection.

Something else she might have meant by this possibly which was that she understood Jack’s motivations behind the act. She knew what he was all about rather. But this interpretation had never had occurred to him. She understood the symbolism of the mask and the depraved state he had assumed when wearing it. But vain Jack H. had always believed he was in a category of his own when it came to his inner life’s torment. He didn’t think his mind made any discernable pattern whatsoever. He didn’t think in short there was anything to “get” with him. He was above it all, a type of divine mystery even to himself. So she couldn’t have meant this really when she spoke of knowing him. He couldn’t imagine it could be even remotely true.

Now, he didn’t have nightmares about her specifically any longer and never saw her face in whatever stage of composition it was in while asleep. Rather, he consistently recalled a scene where she was entirely absent. It was some place in a primordial jungle where he seemed to be consigned for all time.

In the dreamed-of jungle there was a clearing wherein a building could be perceived. But somehow the dread he experienced when moving towards it always got the better of him. It was a place somehow that he was prohibited from entering. Or even approaching. He had no conscious explanation for why this might be the case. He had never been to a jungle before. And while in this jungle he felt deeply uncomfortable. But he never so much as

approached the building. And he never understood fully the connection between the building and Dr. Menen Khan.

The image of Gihanga's palace of bones, it might have been explained to Jack by a theoretical third party who had witnessed the attack, was taped to Menen's living room wall at the time the attack had taken place. But Hameister was so amped up at the time that he blanked it from his conscious memory entirely. To him it was like a holy vision. Which might have been another reason for him to preserve the memories of what had happened for as long as he might. He knew he was going to die soon. Presently he wanted to be in touch with that which was on the other side. He assumed nowadays that to everything there is a season. But this too was a mere effect of his ravaged brain. He couldn't think straight anymore. Therefore, he started to embrace magical thinking as the norm.

When he died, his written request to Peter Square would be for Peter to bury him in the slightly corroded Green Goblin mask that he had used during the attack. Just like an African king with his myriad of identities, he wanted to enter the spirit world on fine terms with the entities that existed there. He wanted to do what was expected of him by the masters of the universe.

Entertaining the quest only for a few seconds, soon Peter began to examine Circus Liquor's giant metal clown's rotating shadow. He entertained the possibility that it had potential as a type of religious object. It was very much like the shadows cast at Stonehenge wherein it was rumored during the summer solstice that a certain pattern would be formed wherein the location of the crashed mother ship that brought life to this planet would be revealed.

But if the clown's shadows held any truths it was a mystery to Peter Square at the moment. He wasn't a drug-fueled mystic certainly, divining patterns in ordinary chaos. His drug taking nowadays just shy of his thirty-eighth birthday was strictly limited to a rolled joint at the end of every day. The stress of his profession had proven too much to bear up to otherwise. Sometimes he liked to punch the heavy bag he had set up in the barn for one hour increments. Sometimes he would down half a quart of

whiskey but taking pulls from the bottle directly and let the chips fall where they may.

He didn't snort, he didn't mainline, he barely drank (by a drug dealer's louche standards) and he always made sure the surroundings he found himself in at any particular moment were safe enough. Or else he would cut out without notification regardless of what he said he would be doing and where he would be doing it.

He was always looking out for number one which by itself could irritate somebody who was trying to get close to him. He didn't see that the world was this wondrous, mysterious place full of love and life. He was deeply earthy in his outlook, pragmatic, devoid of any sort of half conceptualized notion that God would provide. This attitude was unusual for somebody in his line of work. By and large the drug dealing business attracted either irredeemable narcissists who imagined a personal destiny intertwined in each horrible event, or pharmaceutical grade psychopaths, violent and immoral men and women. These tended to live in the ever expanding moment like your proverbial noble savage. If they thought about the future at all they thought it would all wind up for the best. Bat shit crazy types. So many were drug addicts themselves due to their recklessness. Which was to say maybe they were devoid of any real philosophy to begin with.

Vanessa Doubet, Peter always suspected, was smoking ice on the sly. It was profoundly difficult to cultivate a methamphetamine habit on the sly but if any person could, it was Vanessa.

Pretty enough lady if you ignored the bags around her eyes that framed, often as not, a murderous gaze aimed at Peter's direction, a heavy smoker's stretched skin, and the span of multi-colored tattoos on both her hands and forearms and upper arms and shoulders and torso and halfway up one side of her neck and halfway down one thigh. Nowadays many people found tattoos attractive. But then again many of Vanessa's tats were tableaus of death and dismemberment, a baby with its umbilicus still attached dangling like a tetherball from a split open womb. These were all legacies of the ex-biker boyfriend, Freddie, likely. A tough chick with teeth in her snatch so to speak.

Which made her slightly tougher to read when it came time to ascertain if she was dipping into her own product.

At several points in their three year relationship, Vanessa Doubet had claimed to have killed several people while “in the line of duty.”

“You take a gun that feels comfortable in your hand with and just pop pop pop. Then it’s done its over it’s beyond you. All the blood.”

To Peter she would say such things, or words to this effect, whenever this subject of violent retribution against the competition was taken up, usually by her. Vanessa Doubet said that sometimes things happened and these needed to be dealt with in kind and this is why God made handguns and gave them to His children. Weirdly or perhaps ironically religious at such times when she discussed such matters, she was always tying her alleged violent acts to what the Good Lord wanted from her. For Peter, there were no religious overtones to be discovered in her words. To him she was simply changing the subject after it was only half explained. This indicated to him that she was simply making it all up. She never dealt in particulars likely because there weren’t any. The murder talk was a verbal tattoo created as yet another sign that she was, deep down, bonkers. Having gone through so much shit in her life recently he didn’t hold this against her. But at some future point he knew he was going to ask for a demonstration of her prowess with a pistol. He assumed that once he had at that point all the murder talk of hers would stop. He didn’t appreciate really sleeping next to somebody who identified so greatly with various psychopaths. This didn’t make her a psychopath by itself. But he didn’t appreciate somebody who thought about things in that way. Or least thought about things in that way so openly, as if everybody had had such experiences and beliefs and there was no reason to be upset about them when they were spoken of in a blasé way.

If Peter himself was ever forced to level a gun at another person’s direction, he knew he would be anything but blasé when recollecting it.

“Look, I’m not deep down somebody like Freddie,” he said to Vanessa. “This is my profession, not my soul,” he

said to her. “This is not something I’d like to be doing in ten years.”

Once in the passenger seat of his cherry red Mustang that she had picked him up in minutes after he left Jack Hameister swimming in a gathering pool of his own stink, he thought he had earned the right to talk to her like that, to speak to her honestly about how he felt about things rather than the way he thought she wanted him to feel about them. For his ninety minute stroll up Vineland Avenue, he had earned six hundred dollars, the entirety which was composed of twenty dollar bills. Presently these were situated in his jeans’ right front pocket now. They were going to be used to fund their vacation to Disneyland and Tijuana.

He didn’t want to start a fight with Vanessa simply to point out the obvious. Which was that she was full of shit and not nearly the scary bitch she made herself out to be. Peter couldn’t imagine her punching somebody in the face let alone shooting him. And it was always her past association with Freddie she used to establish her psycho cred. He was a crazy motherfucker. Therefore, she must be one too.

‘Nessa was always trying to point out the differences between Peter and Freddie to Peter’s disadvantage. But Peter Square knew this was not what she felt deep down. In her less scripted moments Vanessa Doubet had told him many times about how in the presence of the Mongols she could never relax. There was always something up with them. And as a chick she was entirely divorced from their trust. They never let a woman into their inner circle. Which left you as a target of paranoid suspicion always whenever one of their kind got busted or jumped in one of the seedy San Bernardino bars that the Mongols used to hang out in seven days a week even on Christmas.

In contrast to Freddie and his cohorts, Peter Square thought of himself as a business professional with a business professional’s sense of decorum when it came to tending to work-related matters.

“I have a college degree,” Peter told Vanessa what must have been for the thirtieth time that week. He meant to add that this was in contrast to Freddie. He had never met Freddie and hoped he never would. But he was tired of

carrying his water in this relationship. He didn't see why he kept on getting compared to him when according to Vanessa he hadn't upheld his end of the business even to the lax standards of his fellow bikers. He was a bum but somehow she was in love with him. So fuck them both. Peter considered himself a businessman. If they wanted each other in that way they could always re-unite. He wouldn't stand in their way. He wouldn't even pretend that he had any hurt feelings about it.

Peter on most days would bring in nine hundred dollars in the form of the twenty and tens he had only accepted as payment from his heads. Any higher currency he didn't want on him as he assumed it would have attracted attention from police. Neither did he want to handle all the loose singles some of these losers would offer him, taken from Lord knew where and with Lord knew what on their surfaces. The mattress that they were using as their bank was bulky enough without having to accommodate all these crumpled up singles and fin bucks so recently pulled from a user's filthy hands.

This was to say that he was a success in his chosen line of work. Thanks to Peter's efforts, if the two of them wanted to get out of the business in several years with the three or four hundred thousand dollars they had saved, by that point it would be entirely through Peter's efforts alone.

"The shit you make is mostly amphetamine," he said to her, after noting the especially scraggly appearance of late of his Vineland Avenue clientele. Look, this was not a major concern, but presently he felt the need to point out to her that she was not especially good at her job. He was trying to tell Vanessa in any number of ways that he was not Freddie. He was trying to set the record straight about who needed who in this partnership.

Agitated more than slightly about the clicking of the telephoto lenses he had heard back in the liquor store alley, Square was trying to come to some sort of stasis by picking a fight with his girlfriend. He had a lot of anxiety that needed to be unloaded on somebody quickly. It didn't matter to him just then that this was the start of a long overdue vacation for them both. He had heard the clicking and now he needed to vent. He needed to tell her that he was on the front lines in this thing. That he was the one in

the FBI's crosshairs. He needed to tell her tell her that if anybody was going to get arrested it was him, not her. Back in the converted barn, Vanessa Doubet went days without seeing sunlight. The cooking process was volatile of course and she risking her health utterly. But there was no comparison to the dangers of selling. He would be amazed if she tried to argue with him about it. He didn't think there was any serious argument to be made.

So he was telling her in an indirect, but cranky way to shut up about her history of violence and what she would do if pushed into a corner by somebody who had meant her harm. Maybe this would come to pass and then Peter Square would apologize to her about his initial disbelief. He would tell her deep down he knew what she was saying was true. He would tell her that he could have done it himself absent of a threat to his own life.

In fact he had violent resources beyond those which he would readily admit to. He cultivated his image of a cool businessman to the detriment of his genuine capabilities. But he was never in his worst moment another Freddie. He didn't walk innocently down the street and punch unsuspecting passers-by in the face like Freddie used to do. He didn't carry around a knife in his boot heel while visiting relatives just in case one of them got out of line like Freddie had.

Now if 'Nessa wanted to take offense at anything he had just said and come back at him that was fine. They could have it out right in Peter's Mustang. They were taking the scenic route out to Anaheim through Laurel Canyon in the manner of true tourists eager for the encounters promised by a travel guide. They didn't see themselves as especially dangerous or depraved characters. They were in the midst of normal playacting. They didn't feel the immediate need to express themselves in the profane and desperate ways that they soon would when the legal noose began to tighten around them.

It was just a vacation for them, this respite, in between the harshness of their ordinary lives. They both were armed as it turned out, but they had become so accustomed to strolling out of their house armed that there was no reason to interpret the presence of a gun on either of them as any sort of sign of trouble. They didn't believe

Mickey Mouse packed heat. Peter once encountering him would suspect him briefly of being a narc. He would grip Mickey's cloth head and try to encounter the eyes inside. People would stare and a toddler would start to cry at his actions. Then he would abandon the project for another dream vision altogether.

Having made Peter long ago for the paranoid loser he was, Vanessa Doubet knew enough not to start punching back just yet.

"I am putty in your hands," she told Peter, fumbling for her sunglasses as Vanowen Street was encountered. She didn't know off-hand what this was about, what exactly had triggered the outburst from him. But she knew a trap was being set for her. She thought to go limp until it could all be figured out. She stuck out her tongue and put the car in gear. There was nothing to this. She could slap Peter down anytime she wanted.

But she wanted to know what Peter's play was before reacting. She was struggling slightly to find the answer presently. It wasn't compassion definitively for her. Neither was it some unexamined level of affection he held for himself that was manifesting as aggression towards her.

There was strategy involved to Peter's belligerence but she was at a loss temporarily to articulate what it was. She assumed Peter needed her in some practical way. Likely having it out with him would have strained or even ruptured their relationship for good. That might be what he wanted.

She didn't think she needed him. All through the drive over the Santa Monicas she was creating a mental index of all the ways Peter's immediate loss might have hurt her. For one thing it would have put a great damper on her vacation. Nobody would ever want to stroll down Disneyland's enchanted precincts by herself. And the red Mustang was his. If he up and left her in the next twenty-four hours, she would have to take a series of buses to get back home. And this by itself was reason enough to make nice with him temporarily.

She would in the near future have to decide when enough was enough regarding all Peter's bullshit. Corrective action was needed. Presently she was thinking about when to take it. For now she was content to let him

rant and rave. For now she would admit a type of wonderment as to his angry feelings toward her and clam up. She would let him pacify himself with all his tough talk.

He wanted to be the man in this relationship for a while so she would let him convince himself that he actually was. The emotional avowals that passed between people were only meaningful in the sense that it forecasted some type of action. But if you said one thing and did another words were meaningless. This more than anything she had learned from Freddie and the Mongols. Pragmatic in their dealings with the world, they seldom declared their intentions toward you in advance. They had learned the act of lying as a matter of course. This was a crucial skill for a prospective criminal. It was easy to engage in but hard to master. It took practice just like anything else.

“Baby, listen,” Vanessa told Peter and sought his eyes through her tinted frames. “You are my everything, my reason for reason, my holy prophet. Honey, OK? You are the sacred green light. The reason I get up in the morning and sober up. I think I’m alive. You are the reason for that as well.”

Too much talk between them for the good of their relationship, she thought, seeing the anger well up in the crags of his admittedly beautiful face. It was all bullshit and she gave him credit for knowing that this was so. She needed a distraction, a play for sympathy prior to her reaching a decision about what she would do with him. She would fuck him later that night and make him sleep. Then she would rifle through the contents of his wallet and remove the ammo from his Tek. She could disable the firing mechanism on the weapon by taking it apart and removing the titanium screw connecting the trigger to the firing pin.

This last bit had been a bit of Freddie knowledge, communicated free of charge. Freddie told her you should never let a man get the drop on you if you could help it. There was no such thing as honor for a small, otherwise helpless man determined to live through the night in prison. You did not directly confront another man unless you were absolutely certain he was no threat to you. Better to be a sneak than a corpse, he always told Vanessa using a more colorful term for both objects. I mean it was

something you shouldn't have given any thought to at all. It was a strategy that normal people would adopt within a few seconds of thinking about it.

With this in mind Peter Square must have been deeply naïve in his dealings in the criminal world or else he wouldn't have shown his hand to Vanessa Doubet in the first place. He wouldn't have been so pissy and demeaning to her in such an open way. He thought all the drama between them was over. He thought he had said his peace and that was that. She had been put in her place by her man, according to him. She had been shown what's what and who's who five minutes before hitting the Sunset Strip.

This all made her begin to consider whether or not Peter Square was in fact too stupid to keep on as a partner, regardless of whatever shit he would try with her in the future. Square was a middle class dude with the middle class's great gift of obliviousness. In ninety-nine percent of the circumstances he encountered in his life this lack of processing power did not harm him. But in the past few minutes he had just revealed himself to be a danger to the entire operation because of his own inability to think something through thoroughly. So something that would have been done gradually was now a priority. She hadn't thought about how deep his own stupidity ran up until now. Maybe he would redeem himself to her at some point on this vacation. But in her mind Vanessa Doubet was already moving against him. She had already begun to crunch on the What and the When concerning his demise. Just the way it was, the way it had to be. Square had already one foot in the grave almost. And to her it was suicide, not murder. Dumb motherfuckers get themselves killed constantly regardless who pulls the trigger. He had done this to himself whatever it would be. It was all his goddamned fault.

The hotel that they were going to stay in just outside the park had a forty-thirty check in time. This meant they had time to kill. They had planned on checking in then seeing the park by night. If this was possible. Maybe they should have planned their vacation a little better but this was how they rolled. Libertines, like the Marquise D' Sade, who it must be said was notoriously slovenly when it came to his vacation itinerary. Days of downtime with him in

castles spent in rural France all because of poor planning. He lacked the efficiency gene. He lacked the ability to predict what he would be doing from one day to the next.

All the bars in West Hollywood and places south of West Hollywood had never proven so seductive to Peter who it must be admitted seldom ventured to this part of town any longer. He didn't see the appeal of the Strip either at night or certainly during the day. He felt no affection to the street's legacy even slightly.

"There used to be a pachinko parlor around here," Peter said to Vanessa looking down a particular south running artery off Sunset. Maybe it was down this street or maybe it was in an entirely different part of town altogether. He didn't know, he never had been. But over the years his clients would summon the memory of this semi-notorious joint somewhere in or near Little Ethiopia. Pachinko was gambling at its purest wherein a small payout could always be counted on for a plastic wafer tumbling into a certain hole. Eventually state authorities would close the place down on account of the prohibition of all games of chance in the Republic. But it couldn't have been that it had closed shop already. There was so much vice taking place all around them this one lone parlor couldn't have fallen prey to an LAPD sting. They would be bailed out and re-opened before the case ever had a chance to be adjudicated. No cop worth his salt took this sort of gambling shit seriously. There was a meth epidemic in LA County on-going, for example. Nobody had time for this penny ante vice.

Not that Peter was any sort of gambler himself but he wanted to see for himself what all his heads were carrying on about. If they ever found it, the parlor was bound to disappoint a man like him with a set of rigid expectations for the world. Maybe the whole thing was a meth-based delusion, a type of urban legend whose myth grew parallel to the use of powerful mind-altering substances that encouraged such magical thinking to begin with. Like ice itself it was an effective antidote to the cognitive difficulties imposed by sobriety. No more exciting than a bingo parlor in all likelihood but, nevertheless, Peter Square wanted to take a gander. He thought it might be fun to watch so many gambling addicts lose their shirts in what must be a

rigged game. It would have made him feel all the more holy because of it. At least it would have made him feel that he was glad he wasn't one of them.

So they went south on Melrose then west on Van Nuys once more driving as slowly as the constant press of cars so endemic to the area would allow them, bumper to bumper from mountain to ocean and back again. First time out here from Indy in the early eighties, Peter had actually thought the traffic to be the occasion of some as yet unknown tumult taking place downtown that so many hundreds of thousands were struggling to escape from. Later that week coming back from a buy he realized that this was merely the nature things out here. A traffic jam was building all around him at two in the morning. For many in its midst it didn't seem like a matter for commenting upon.

"I doubt there'd be a sign up," Peter said to Vanessa about the pachinko parlor. They were circling every block in the area hoping they would be able to identify it by sight. Maybe they should have looked for an establishment that was simply devoid of signage. If there was a sign it wouldn't likely describe what went on inside. It would advertise something vague and generic like "social hall." It would cause little excitement amongst the neighbors, many of whom would not be aware what had occurred inside its likely darkened windows and soundproofed corridors.

Maybe it was a backroom operation and either a Laundromat or the sort of half-stocked butcher shop that was prevalent in this area was in front of it, displaying the disembodied and skinless heads of cattle in its front windows as proof of the resident butcher's art. If this was the case they would never find it. They were unwilling to go on a door to door search. This wasn't the safest area in the first place. And this was a mere lark. Peter Square didn't give a fuck enough about locating the parlor to remove himself from the car to look.

So what they did for the next ten minutes was methodically drive through Little Ethiopia's streets. South of its unofficial border, they turned once more toward the Great Ocean. They were done searching. They had given as much to the effort as they were prepared to just then.

“Back in our own country again,” Peter told Vanessa once this was done admitting that this small neighborhood of which he had never ventured into more than three times disturbed him more than any other in the city. “It feels good to be back in America. I never knew why we had to leave it in the first place.”

Square’s bad mood had seemed to spill over into entirely different areas of conversation. Presently he was looking to pick fights with everybody and anybody. He knew deep down he wasn’t racist. So secure in this knowledge he felt comfortable calling a spade a spade.

“Your average American nigger,” he said to Vanessa when he felt the need to elaborate on his previous statement, “has at least some degree of intelligence. They have some white blood in their veins. Some of them can talk normal. They’ve been to college a few. They have dogs and cats as pets and so forth. Some of them even have jobs,” he said. “Whereas your typical East African looks at a stray dog happening by and thinks: *lunch*. None of them have jobs. I seen the look in their eyes. I seen what they’re up to even if they’ve think they’ve hid it from plain sight.”

Not that he was a bigot, a racist, he went on to say, but once one of these skinny East African niggers gives you the eye it’s nothing you could forget about until you’re by yourself and safe and have taken a long hot shower and downed a quart of Jack to remove the stink of the gaze from you. They all want something from you. I mean something physically from you. They can’t help it, he told her. Well, not really. The hunger had infiltrated their souls, and cracked it. And now all that was left for them was the hunger. The wretched of the earth, so to speak, if you wanted to put it like that. Or maybe they were not human at all.

Peter had no idea how so many of them had made it to the US in the first place. But there they were trolling the precincts of this Los Angeles neighborhood that few outside the immediate vicinity had ever talked about. Square should have written his congressman asking for the immigration restriction. But he had no idea of his congressman’s name. And that’s the sort of cranky missive that might boomerang against you nowadays in today’s PC

culture. So it was best to forget the whole thing. Better never to step foot again in the area then start being some sort of anti-African activist. He had his turf and they had theirs. And such an accommodation was the best that could be done at the time.

Too much shit to be done in the short term to go picking fights with implacable enemies. Doing what he did for a living, Peter Square needed to think strategically, in terms of what could be done rather than what was the best possible outcome. Simple as could be, but he did have his moods that tended to cloud his thinking on such matters. He needed to learn to shut the fuck up a little better especially in front of Vanessa. He needed to harden himself, which basically meant constructing a barrier between his thoughts and the world so that finally nobody knew what he felt about anything. Inscrutableness was the right tone for a drug dealer to project. Even his sainted mother should have no clue about his real feelings. And the fact that he held prejudices or weaknesses would be unimaginable to those closest to him. Every fact about his true self would be a revelation. The news would be received like science fiction when it arrived. It simply wouldn't be believed.

It made sense to Peter that he should behave like this monster of his recent imaginings. So he resolved that this was the last he would speak of it while in Vanessa's presence. He would try his best to become a better man. The smell of oleander and thyme emanating from the area's Ethiopian restaurants along with the dull snapping noise of all the bed sheets protruding from apartment windows would not be spoken of Peter Square again. If Vanessa wanted to talk about it, he would sit there and nod solemnly but admit no knowledge of the subject whatsoever. Similarly the memories of the malingerers along the streets they drove through would inspire no comment from him. Little Ethiopia was behind him even as they had yet to depart its official precincts. He had made up his mind about it. With him, that was that. He had no desire to fuck himself over in that way so that his weaknesses were known by this person next to him who he had rapidly begun to conceive of as an enemy. You never said shit in front of somebody you didn't trust completely.

Square had always known this but presently he was intent on living up to it. He would be distant even in his warmest moments. He had had his say on the subject.

He would gradually divorce himself from human affairs altogether in order to stay alive. With him it was what must be. Needed to observe and plan, nothing else. Become less like himself by degrees and more like the love of his life, Vanessa.

So much that needed to be done between now and when he would next have it out with her that it was a shame she and him were headed for a vacation. The old Peter might well have blurted this out to her using the same language more or less. The new Peter simply wondered how quickly he could make an excuse to curtail the excursion. He could mouth the famous *Mickey Mouse Club* theme had made his skin crawl unexpectedly. He would claim he had no idea how far away Tijuana was from LA even though he had actually lived there for a brief period at the close of the eighties in yet another of his aborted attempts to Leave All This Behind.

Or just grin and bear it. It wouldn't be so bad, he didn't think. He wasn't going to get drunk or high in her presence but remaining sober wouldn't be such a burden. He would regardless need to start to enjoy his second life. It was too much anguish to live a lie constantly. You needed to make up an excuse to be carefully even when plotting. This, Square supposed, was every world-class schemer's trick. There were only minimal falsehoods involved. And eventually they sometimes were mysteries to themselves.

"We can go cruise back up Sunset and find the highway a little faster that way," Peter said to Vanessa when stopped at a light.

Just at the moment as she had flipped on her turn signal (always a careful driver!), a doughy white guy without a shirt approached their car from the sidewalk.

The man stood in front of the vehicle for a few seconds to block their route of escape. Slowly he walked over to Peter's side of the car. Then he asked Peter Square to roll down his window.

"Cole Stewart," he introduced himself to Peter through the two inch crack that Peter had created by rolling the window down. "I seen you sitting at the light," he said to

him. “I seen you looking around and waiting for when a guy like me would finally appear.”

As they had been at this light only a few seconds it didn’t seem possible this could be the case. The name Cole Stewart did not ring a bell with Peter Square. According to him, he and Peter had done business together on several occasions. But somebody like Cole, if only because of the klieg light eyes, would have been remembered. Moreover, despite his doughy appearance he had the look of somebody who had just been out for a run. His pale skin was covered with splotches of pink from either a rising or retreating temperature. His words were hurried as if he was short of breath. But he definitely did not seem the type to go out for a jog.

The tattoo on Cole Stewart’s exposed chest showed a section of a bridge either half constructed or half destroyed. He had an expensive looking digital video camera in his right hand whose viewfinder he kept on peeking at every few seconds. There was a frozen image in the viewfinder’s monitor apparently that he wanted Peter Square to see.

He told Vanessa and Peter that he was an independent filmmaker doing his best to show his film to as many people as possible. He was a street marketer. This was what he was doing out here on LaBrea Avenue at the moment, he said. He approached stopped cars and pressed his camera’s viewfinder hard against the cars’ window glass to give passengers as close a view of possible of his creation. It didn’t seem an especially efficient model of distribution. But every prospective Hollywood mogul had to start somewhere. Cole was emotionally invested in this project by the looks of him. He felt whatever he had captured on film was profound enough to risk getting run over by audience members. His face revealed a great deal of consternation but no fear. He didn’t give a damn what somebody’s opinion was of his mental health. He wanted to turn them on merely. He didn’t give a damn what they thought of his bridge tattoo.

He never considered himself a real filmmaker of the Hollywood corporate stripe. Rather he was a zealot, slightly uncomfortable over the object of his zealotry because it was so new. He wanted to know if these images were

worth all the pain and danger. He was showing it to others in hopes of gaining some perspective about it. He genuinely wanted to know what it was about and he was looking to others to answer the question for him. He had lost perspective about the project months ago. It was only a year old. He couldn't put a single cogent sentence together objectively describing its contents if he tried.

"Watch and see," Cole Stewart told Peter Square, before muttering something obtuse about his old lady's demise. My old lady, my old lady's dead and gone, Cole said to himself, as if it was news to him that needed to be briskly communicated. This film was made as penance and shown as a tribute for her, as a tribute for Karen. He didn't say this but this was the logical association to make. He was all broken up about Karen's demise. At least that's the impression he was trying to leave Peter with.

Naked bearded man squirmed in the viewfinder's center filmed from close-up as if an impaled worm on a hook. Was he nailed right in like Jesus Christ was, once upon a time? Nailed right in? Hard to say from the single close-up that the film was limited to, but it might have explained his constant movements. Perhaps he was engaged in an act of dynamic meditation, thus communing with *Palatta*, the secret fabric of the universe binding all life forms together in the manner of ice age creatures trapped in LaBrea's famous tar pits. It was Cole Stewart's opinion that this man was suffering greatly for sins of an entirely personal nature. When you OD'd on a cocktail of booze and depressants, for example, your body started to spasm before you blacked out. Various nerve agents had the same effect on a body. Maybe this naked chap in the viewfinder's center had been exposed to something profoundly toxic like mustard gas seconds before the camera mysteriously turned itself on. Maybe he was just stoned up to the point of passing out and his body was in the midst of presenting him with the bill.

Cole Stewart hadn't filmed it, he swore. He hadn't pressed the button on the camera's side, even though it was his movie. It was of him, about him, even though no court of law could convict him of the crime being filmed, if indeed that's what was being witnessed when one stared into the viewfinder's center.

He hadn’t pressed the button, so he didn’t know exactly what was on display. He was looking into the camera along with everybody else to see what he had made. It made sense to him at a certain level what he was seeing but he didn’t have any deep theories about it. He thought somebody would explain it to him in literal terms eventually. This was part of the reason he was out here. He thought this was the payment owed to him for a job well done.

Presumably the film had incubated as an image in Cole’s unconscious for so long that eventually it broke through into the wider world and became something everyone could see.

“If I had a vote,” Cole Stewart said to Peter, “I’d vote crucifixion. You can see the flecks of blood on his beard if you freeze frame. But they don’t ever zoom out to show us what’s happening. Maybe he’s simply getting his dick sucked. Don’t ever let us see why he’s in the state he’s in.”

Across the street inside the shadow Cole had emerged from originally, an emaciated black man nodded his assent at everything Cole was saying. To somebody watching them both, this would have made it seem that he was Cole’s handler. Seemingly there was a series of rehearsed lines Cole was reciting. Or perhaps it was these sentiments were so obvious that they only seemed like a series of rehearsed lines. There was no room for improvisation when describing the film to others. It was either one thing or nothing at all. The scene, or whatever it could be genuinely described as, was entirely drained of abstraction. There was no vestigial hook protruding from its vulgar exterior onto which one could impart the mystery of oneself. Which was the reason why it was so compelling to watch in the first place.

“Take some time to think over what you really think,” Cole said to them both but by that time Peter Square’s red Mustang was long gone, taking with it the viewfinder’s shield that Cole Stewart had managed to shove inside the window crack. Quite likely they wouldn’t think it over at all. It just wasn’t something they were determined to do. Merely they saw Cole Stewart as just another casualty of Little Ethiopia. It was all a dodge he was trying to pull, to simply lure them from their car and attempt to do them

harm. He had no spiritual side to him even though he might have vehemently disagreed. He was a shyster, whose false testimony had convinced himself only about the truth of what had been on brief display.

He was simply too much like them to ever win their trust. They knew everything that he was on about. They knew what he was on about so much better than even he knew himself.

There was no time for movies of this kind for deeply experienced people. Ordinary people knew what it meant to really suffer. They knew Jesus Christ had a secret to share with the world. And when he died on the cross the secret died with him.

They didn't see either of themselves in the film's images hardly. They didn't go to the movies at all nowadays. They didn't know any of the kinds of people that did go to movies nowadays. Whatever was on the boob tube at a given moment was what they watched. They weren't complex, searching folk. They had a simple relationship to the broader culture. They went years upon years without considering their place in it even a little.

It wouldn't be until two days later when Vanessa and Peter would hold any sort of emotion at all toward Cole Stewart and his movie. And when they did it would be in the same distracted fashion that they had seen the goddamned thing in the first place through the cracked open passenger side window. But once they had reconsidered at that moment it would hit them with a force of revelation as if heaven's hidden gate had cracked open only for them. Everything would have been building unto that moment. From then on, the image of the writhing man in the viewfinder would be specifically recalled by both of them with absolute clarity. There would not be a moment for the rest of their lives that it wouldn't be in the back of their minds.

This would happen in old Tijuana exactly twenty-four hours after they had been kicked out Disneyland for assaulting a transgender Snow White. The puppet show they would be watching at the time in a garbage-strewn plaza would be entitled, *Holy Mystics of the East*. It was intended as a comedy of a sort. Also, it was intended as religious indoctrination of the crudest, most sinister sort.

Children were supposed to watch it then ask their parents to go see God in the rough looking warehouse where it was advertised in English-only he would be. From eight to eight one day only. And for a nominal fee of course.

# Chapter Eight → (March 26, 1997)

**O**nce in Anaheim, well past the hotel's supposed check-in time, Peter Square briefly considered what he had been so angry about all this time.

"I can't see why it's set up like this," Peter said to Vanessa Doubet while fidgeting with their room's remote control. He was referring to the TV that kept changing to a closed circuit channel dedicated to hyping SoCal's glorious attractions to hotel patrons. Didn't matter what channel was selected. It always reverted to this frequency eventually. Because it was such a regular effect, it didn't seem so much a malfunction as a pre-programmed feature of the TV.

The hotel's proprietors didn't want their guests watching TV for an extended time apparently. Or maybe they thought that here in the armpit of paradise people had more exciting things to do altogether.

Maybe there was some trick, some sequence of buttons to press on the remote to make the TV go back to normal.

"I heard there is some such thing as an Easter egg," Peter told Vanessa referring to the hidden programmatic features software developers' built-in to their code. Maybe it worked like this by depressing **GUIDE** and **MENU** at the

same time. Once this occurred a heretofore inaccessible dialog box would appear asking the user if he wanted to shut off all internal stations. Maybe it would only work for twenty-four hours but it was better than nothing. Because in the operative state it was in presently guests were bound to complain about their TV.

The closed circuit channel that the TV kept switching to was entitled *California Living Today*.

“Been out here most of my adult life,” Peter Square said of the Golden State. “But I haven’t been to one goddamn place they’ve shown at all.”

Indeed, rather than a compendium of the folkways and mores associated with America’s thirty-third state, *California Living Today* was content to document so many familiar popular attractions of Orange County south to the Mexican border. It was in fact a tourist-industry sponsored programming loop that repeated every twenty minutes. It was a stay at home sightseeing tour for all that the region had to offer. It wasn’t meant to entertain or even inform as much as stimulate a consumer impulse. It was a perpetual commercial aimed at especially unreflective consumers.

Deadened to life’s possibilities by obfuscating decades spent in the materialist West, these travelers were desirous of the type of low level culturally-neutral thrill wherein the mind was never engaged to consider the socio-economic circumstances within which the thrill providers existed. Folks who took holidays in Anaheim didn’t want to meet real people. If they did they would have taken holidays in the favelas of Brazil.

Knowing this, *California Living Today’s* creators had tailored its pitch accordingly. There was no real possibility for adventure on display in the attractions that the channel showed. There was no sense that human experience, be it in California or elsewhere, was enhanced by the danger brought forth by the direct exposure to the natural objects that so much of modern society had been constructed to exclude from a person’s daily life in the first place. Thrill seekers wanted to go scuba diving off Monterrey, for example, and risking a shark bite that was their prerogative. The activity would not be hyped on the closed circuit channel. The station’s creators had no desire to cleanse the doors of perception. They didn’t care really

about the way the world actually was, raw and sometimes antithetical to basic safety concerns. Neither they nor their audience wanted to swim with sharks. They knew they would die eventually in white, well-lighted rooms attended by machines. For all of them, this was enough nature for a lifetime. They didn't care about the rest of it.

They were believers in higher powers for the most part who desired theme parks to buttress their beliefs in magic and supernatural salvation and the nonsense that stuck in the mind when you paid too much attention to Sunday school sermons. Disneyland in particular had plenty to offer along these lines. The compound provided the sort of immersive quasi-magical experience that mimicked mystical vision in the same way a cockatoo could be coaxed to mimic a great Italian tenor's rendering of a certain Verdi aria. All the right notes were hit in the Magic Kingdom but the passion was missing from the song. Nothing could be faked that well. But maybe they knew this after a fashion but were too rich to care.

In Disneyland's safe alabaster chambers when you wished upon a star your dreams came true. Disneyland was the Happiest Place on Earth™ after all. People went to Disneyland to have their dreams fulfilled. To be born again into the childhood conviction that this universe was at its root magical. Nothing infantilized a grown man like Walt and Roy Disney's intellectual properties. The upside to this was that you were secure in its confines. Baseheads wouldn't come up to you on Mickey Mouse Boulevard like they did on North Hollywood's Vineland Avenue bearing a maniacal grudge. The omnipresent sense of danger tangible in all human convocations since the beginning of time was noticeably missing in the Magic Kingdom. For this, the park's creators needed to be commended mightily. If only because it was so difficult to pull off. If only because of the degree of mass manipulation that was required to get the job done was so impressive regardless of the amorality of the action.

All too deeply experienced people like Peter Square and Vanessa Doubet would invariably walk through Disneyland's immaculate corridors like art connoisseurs at a flea market. They would smirk as they went. The fun for them was in knowing how much fucking smarter they were

than anybody else. They weren't suckered in by the antiseptic dream like everybody else. They were deeply experienced in the Blakean sense. They knew how society really worked unlike the happy truck driver and his wife with the fat kid from El Segundo. They knew that magic had flown from the world. They knew the universe as a machine devoid of subjective concern entirely.

They wouldn't see the inherent religiosity of the place. The undertow of sadness created by so much concentrated artifice would be lost on them utterly. Their spirits were numbed by its accrued scar tissue, over-experienced. They wouldn't see the pathos of their surroundings created not by the usual Disney clichés but by the hopefulness and good cheer that clichés engendered in so many, regardless of the cynicism in which they were being offered.

According to *California Living Today*, there was a number of other SoCal theme parks besides Disneyland that would divert tourists for a time sufficient enough so that it became worth the exorbitant prices demanded for entrance.

"The more I look at it," Peter Square said to Vanessa Doubet of the omnipresent channel, "the more I think I'm becoming like everybody else."

If they had time (and being self-employed of course they did) perhaps they would check out a show at San Diego's Sea World on their way to Mexico. Maybe a sea lion could be hacked up in offering to a blackfish to make it worth watching. Maybe Vanessa could find something to amuse herself with in the three hours they would spend in the park gawking at marine life in all its diverse nature.

"I think we both needed this," he said to Vanessa of the vacation they were now in the midst of. He took a drag from the joint that he had rolled after abandoning his Easter egg search resting on the glass ashtray in turn resting on the hotel's black and purple striped bedspread. *We both needed this*. It was not a very original sentiment. But he was looking to make amends for his behavior of hours before back in West Hollywood. Mouthed clichés being preferable to silence always when one is trying to be nice, as silence was sometimes preferable to the truth in all its heinous glory. He would get high and she would get high and they would walk around the park until closing.

Then they would come back to the hotel and fuck and order a pay per view movie if the TV allowed it. The next day they would depart for San Diego or Tijuana and that would be that. Soon everything would be back to normal. Which only made a man carry on all the more about how they both needed this. They both knew there were troubled seas ahead.

The joint had been sprinkled with the animal tranquilizer Ketamine just the way he liked it nowadays. After the third toke he was generally confused about why he had been in the midst of picking a fight with Vanessa only two hours ago. The K in it mellowed him out like a concussion would. It made him forgetful about what his lot in life was at the moment.

He suddenly had no idea about why he should be mad about anybody over anything at all. The chain of memory linking his recent life history and his anxious rage had been temporarily broken. He literally had lost the ability to think up a reason to stay mad.

On the pot/K combo, such selective bits of amnesia were so common with so as to not even merit consideration as to its origin.

“I don’t know where my head was at,” he said to her as a type of non-binding apology for his former self. He decided to smoke the rest of the joint himself rather than share it with Vanessa. He believed this cigarette to be a specialized type of gourmet experience whose pleasures would be lost on an ordinary drug gobbler like her. To him it would be like using an outstanding foie gras as sandwich spread. Nessa was uncouth he felt deep down. And more than anything he simply had no desire to share his stash with her. He wanted his high to be an immersive experience just like going to Disneyland. He wanted no gap existing between his real self and his drugged one.

He was sick of peeking out through the loose fitting folds of experience. He wanted his buzz to be complete and deep as a bone tumor.

When mixed together at a certain ratio and then smoked, ketamine and cannabis gave a body deeply defined hallucinations that could not, either at the present moment or when considering them later, be cleaved from ordinary perception. The experience of this hybrid drug

was like a string of viral DNA whose chemical information, once having infected a healthy chromosome, became irrevocably intertwined with its host. It altered reality, man. It didn't merely distort it.

Which wasn't nearly as fun as the other way around. But therein you have another reason why Peter considered the hybrid drug an acquired taste. Its effects gave him an excuse to be selfish. He needed to become more closed off altogether. It gave him an excuse to disconnect from ordinary reality.

He could get high and develop this filtered way of looking at the world that he was convinced held the key to success. He needed to be cold and above it all. The way to be cold was to block things out emotionally. He was convinced the key to blocking things out emotionally was to simply deny the reality that was in front of him at a given moment.

When witnessing anything unusual after smoking K and weed together, the smart course of action was always to pretend there was nothing strange on-going at all. Didn't want to get called out by an actual bystander that you assumed was a figment. People tended to freak out when the visionary experience became so obvious in another person. They didn't buy into notion that all perception was in a sense false testimony. That the mere evidence of the eyes was something to be accepted or discarded on a whim.

Also, since there was so little reliable testimony emanating from your senses at the moment, it was smart to just play along for a while until the metaphysical wheat so to speak could be separated from the chaff.

"Got the wrong room, bro," Peter Square told the silent and sullen figure standing in the room's mysteriously open door. He was staring in at Peter as if Peter was the one required to explain his presence in the room. He was a black guy with a triangular face. He was small, nearly skinny as the skeleton that kept him upright, and, possessed of eyes that were far too large for its surroundings to not be considered some sort of mutation if not a full blown disfigurement. The man didn't seem possessed of the power of speech. Or at the moment he was refusing to speak even as he was being spoken to. An

uppity little jigaboo, in other words, who needed to be put in his place forthwith by Peter Square. But the problem was Peter was having severe problems with his spatial orientation at the moment even when reclined on the room's king-sized bed. Standing would have been a true labor for him and walking briskly over to a stranger in the way one would have to demonstrate one's as yet unarticulated aggressive instincts toward him was an impossibility at the moment. Give him another thirty minutes before the buzz started to wear off. But likely by then the mysterious stranger in the doorway would have flown from the world as he had never been there to begin with. With this in mind it seemed silly to Peter that he was taking umbrage with an illusion. That is, something that was as much a part of him as the lobe of his liver, or his own screams emanating from his dreamed-of mouth when being subjected to forced prison sex. In such dreams he was always screaming even before penetration. This too was a mystery, but in this hallucination he never thought about how come. So it was a different sort of status that was assigned to this vision in front of Peter Square at the moment. This one had given him pause. It seemed to want something from him apart from being sustained by his faulty perceptions. It seemed in possession of movements and prejudices of its own. Its silence was telling, not merely threatening. It had a plan of its own which Peter Square did not think was necessarily possible. There was an intelligence in the big yellow eyes. They weren't merely pasted on his face like decals curling at the edges. They observed. As if they held some sort of notion about what their master was about to do.

To be truly sentient in a human sense, that is, in possession of a soul, you needed to be aware of a personal past, present, and future. This was the formulation he recalled the handler at Florida's Busch Gardens had explained to young Peter Square when he asked him during the post-show Q-and-A if the orcas he trained were capable of hate.

"Fish brain's too tiny," the handler had told him. "It forgets who it is and who it's mad at every twenty seconds," he said.

All the while the killer whale had been docked on the auditorium’s powder blue perch conditioned to expect food.

“Shazam,” the handler had told it and stabbed at the whale’s snout with the metal terminus what he had called his rescue hook. Didn’t hurt it even slightly, the handler had said. See, you’d need to have something functioning there behind the eyes for it to feel hurt. And that’s just a complete impossibility.

But think: if the souls of animals were illusory, if there was no real suffering behind the very real physical misery that they seemed to endure routinely, what could be absolutely claimed about the souls of men? Men wore malleable masks of flesh underneath which (we were always assured by theologians) dwelt an indivisible spark of the divine. Or something similarly ineffable but complex, Marvin Minsky’s Society of Mind. Something like that.

But maybe underneath the mask, there was simply another mask. And underneath that a black infinity as featureless as the dreams of the dead. Humanity needed to see its own suffering shot through with an element of divine tragedy, as if a silver angel tear was shed at the outbreak of every malignant tumor. This agony, we were told, was of a higher order altogether than the mere physical agony of a trap-caught black bear, let's say, forced to gnaw through its own leg if it was to make it another forty-eight hours in the woods. But maybe the self, the soul, was a simple hallucination not unlike this big-eyed blackie staring daggers through Peter Square as he continued to play with the room's remote searching out an Easter egg. If this was the case there was little to consider from a moral perspective, ever. Men would treat animals humanely because they saw something elevated in their bearing. But when men saw themselves as lower than dogs it was not a good day to be either a dog or a man. It's not a good thing for so many to become aware of their constant misperceptions. Better to think that the world is exactly as it appears. And stop taking the kind of hallucinogenic substances that made it obvious that this simply was not so.

Peter was not aware of the exact moment the vision in front of him (if that what it was) vanished because by the point that it had he had closed his eyes and wrapped the

bedspread around his head and sunk into a Ketamine haze that technically might be considered sleep but was more like a descent into a half-conscious disjointed purgatory of the same type that descended upon a body when he is suddenly woken from the deepest part of sleep and was momentarily unaware of his name and present location and place in the world at once. It wasn't pleasant but it was tolerable if you simply lay there and waited for the fog to lift.

Hard to say how long he was incapacitated but to judge by the clockwork precision of *California Living Today's* procession through high profile SoCal tourist traps, it must have been less than a half hour. When he looked up again the blackie had vanished from his sightlines. Also the hotel door was presently closed. Vanessa, too, was missing from the room and vaguely he was wondering if this was part of her program of psychological torture for him, prior to taking some drastic action against him.

"I plan on keeping my eye on you," he said to himself of his girlfriend once in the shower. He was trying to jumpstart his mind to bring it back from the druggy haze that sometimes lasted the better part of two days when the mixture of K to weed was not right. In normal times this didn't bother him so much and he wouldn't have taken any corrective action. But being on vacation he felt that such a low mental flame was counterproductive to having fun. He wanted to get drunk on the sight of Mr. Disney's sexless creations. He wanted to live as an extrovert up until the time he felt it would not be safe to do so. Half-asleep as he was, it was hard to form words let alone sound a barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world. In retrospect he should have waited until Tijuana or at least Sea World to get so deeply high like this. It would surely linger with him when touring the Magic Kingdom. It would surely put a damper on things if only because he would be so aware of his inability to act rowdy in a sustained way. For mostly thoughtless men like him, screaming and shouting profanities in public places was the signpost of happiness, an imprimatur that validated joy. If the ability to be loutish was even slightly curtailed, he reasoned, so was the ability to be free. Peter Square had been to college but he was still a prole in his reasoning. His allegiances were with the

thugs of the world. He thought of himself as an elevated person but this was not so.

More than the fuzziness of his mind was the image of the empty mask that had occurred to him just after closing his eyes. All throughout his shower he kept on thinking, “am I real?” He couldn’t locate the center of his own psyche. The certainty of exactly who he was had flown from him at the moment.

Vanessa wasn’t here to remind him of his actual identity. So the consideration of a personal impersonalness kept bobbing to the surface of his thoughts. With this consideration came the familiar paranoia that communicated news of his imminent arrest by the DEA. He was wondering if the coon in the doorway wasn’t an FBI agent. Maybe there was some sort of DEA mindfuck ongoing that was required by their higher-ups before the pinch was made. They wanted to soften him up first. They wanted names and addresses from him forthwith.

This sort of thought process once it gained traction in a body was surprisingly difficult to dislodge.

“The less I think about it the harder it becomes,” he said to himself toweling himself off in front of the steamed up bathroom mirror. Through the gathering haze he was trying to get a good look at himself. He wanted to be assured that at least in a physical sense he was still there. He didn’t believe that when the fog dissipated his reflection would be missing. He suspected rather that whatever animating force was to be found inside this self-awareness had flown from the world for good. He had a reached a point of no return regarding his inner life. The mask had slipped slightly and he was briefly able to see the emptiness underneath. And from thereon in there was little point in carrying on.

Eventually, he supposed, he would reach some point of stasis where he would learn to live with this disability if this was what it accurately could be described as. It would all fade into the cosmic background radiation at that point. It would become a part of his emotional landscape as if it had always been present like some long suppressed traumatic memory that once recalled would gradually become less traumatic the longer it could be recalled.

Then again maybe his present state was all a simple adverse reaction, a neurochemical smudge on the mirror of perception. His head would be right eventually. It would snap back into place on its own and then he would have a simple war story to tell about being wasted through the span of a three day vacation.

He didn't know which it would be at that moment while still in the steamy bathroom but he assumed soon enough it would all come clear. Shit tended to work itself out one way or the other. This was every fatalist's notion of the Good News. It was an attempt on their part to ally their feeling of powerlessness with something resembling an optimistic sentiment.

If his head ever cleared, Peter supposed he would have to come up with some sort of nickname for this present mental state. It was too ineffable to be recalled fondly without a term attached to it. It wouldn't be able to be joked about until it could be cataloged with a descriptive phrase.

"I thought I saw something of myself in what you were doing," Peter told the Mad Hatter, or his cloth simulacrum, when encountering him ninety minutes later on a strangely carless and overcast Disney Main Street U.S.A. He had shuffled over there from the park's main gate after having traversed the attraction's hundred acre eastern parking lot.

Silent as the grave per the imagineers' instructions, the character formerly called Hatta in a more literate age, replied with a simple stare.

Peter Square wasn't quite addled enough to expect a verbal reply. There were purple plastic lenses just above the rim of the Mad Hatter's topper that precluded any seeker after of wisdom peering inside the costume. They had anticipated everything in Disneyland including apparently the troubled mindset of Peter Square. Nothing was going to happen in the World's Happiest Place™ that the imagineers didn't want to have happen and roughly at the pace that they had wanted it to occur. Nothing wrong with that if you were of the opinion spontaneity had nothing to do with fun. But seeing the one way lenses also lent the impression that those in charge of this place had something to hide. They weren't promulgating mystery so much as systematically squeezing out any sort of incongruous detail

from the immediate environment. In trying to be utterly earnest they necessarily created a slagheap of secrets whose existence kept adult visitors to Disneyland on their toes. Adults were always looking around for that legendary hidden entrance for example that led to Disneyland's inner workings. They were always probing the characters for a weakness.

They wanted to see one of them scratching their ass on the sly. It would have been the highlight of their trip all the way from Singapore or wherever. It would have been all they had talked about on the long flight home.

This Disney-fied version of The Mad Hatter, as opposed to L. Carroll's Hatta, was in possession of two overlarge buck teeth overhanging a crescent smile like gutter-hanging icicles guarding a front porch in winter.

"I can see it in your dead eyes that you know the answer to your own riddle," Peter said to it, trying his best to stare through the purple lenses but having no luck mostly because, as per the imagineers' script, all characters were supposed to move about as much as possible, to forestall the noticing by children of any imperfection in the characters' presentation such as the bit of cigarette ash on the Mad Hatter's coattails left there yesterday during the two ten minute breaks the park's performers were given during the course of their seven hour shift.

"Why is a raven like a writing desk?" Peter Square asked the Mad Hatter and waited for an answer. He had his own vague ideas about this of course. But he always assumed the answer being that once you tossed each of them into a fire they emerged more less as the same object.

Seasoned veteran of California's enormous recreational drug industry, Square could somehow tell simply by the dip of a dancing shoulder that underneath the costume whoever it was underneath there, man or woman, was a Head, a user of illegal narcotics. Which meant to him that he had an immediate affinity with the creature and that they could ply secrets from each other. He thought this person or creature or whatever it was under there had the answer to the question that had formed while he had been asleep: *am I even real*? Somebody who knew the answer to

one riddle surely would know the answer the other. He thought somehow he had met his spirit guide and was soon to be taken up on a journey. He was somewhat simpatico on that Carlos Castaneda shit as so many of his acquaintances were dopers possessed of the pretension that getting stoned was some route to wisdom. Even now. But up until this moment he didn't believe that any of it applied to him directly.

He thought they would go somewhere and then by degrees the Mad Hatter's wisdom would be imparted to him.

"You could describe it to me in any way you want," he would recall much later on the vacation telling the Mad Hatter from a respectful distance as the character conducted its prescribed rounds up and down Main Street USA. At one time an unruly German child with cotton candy stuck to its cheeks pulled Hatta's 6/10 price tag from the place in the chapeau where it had been fastened on with Velcro. Rather than try to snatch it back Hatta dropped to his knees and pantomimed mock horror. Everything had been anticipated by the hidden imagineers. There might well have been pre-scripted movements that would be demanded of the performers if one of them had been stabbed through the guts or had had their heads lopped off by a samurai sword wielding maniac.

Somehow, from no fault of his own, he had lost Hatta somewhere around the fork in the road from Space Mountain and the Pirates of the Caribbean. And once the creature was lost he assumed for some reason that it would be impossible for them ever to be reunited. The Mad Hatter was a vision, a spirit guide, and presently the vision was lost. It wasn't like the morning paper. Another iteration wouldn't be along the next day.

Maybe he should have made more of an effort to reach out to his spirit guide earlier. The Mad Hatter's sudden absence was a way for the universe of telling him that he wasn't worthy. And still this awful emptiness in him, the sense of a slipped mask devoid of a face inside, persisted. He couldn't blame it anymore on the hepped-up weed. If anything the buzz he was still in the midst of had suppressed the feeling. It had outlived its subjective

origins as if the figments of a nightmare continuing long after the dreamer has awoken.

In such a state as this, he supposed that he would lift Hatta's false head once it was cornered to reveal complete nothingness inside. Or maybe at most a bunch of wires, gears, servo motors, and software in place of a human being. This alchemy, too, he believed the hidden imagineers eminently capable of creating. In this day and age so much was possible. Every non-Head in the world, Peter knew, was in possession of a personal computer nowadays. They went on the Internet for hours at a time. Lord knew what they did but they went on it. Electronic mail was received in California from Malaysia in a blink of an eye. So a robot in place of a human was entirely possible nowadays he had come to believe. He thought the two beings were on the verge of becoming interchangeable.

At some point he would need to clarify his relationship with Hatta if only for himself. Maybe he had chosen the wrong spirit guide. Or the spirit guide was wrong in choosing him. But at that time he felt its absence as a calamitous loss. He had felt he had been given a test and failed it. Through his brain fog he felt a true desperateness descend on him indicating that he had failed.

At Cinderella's castle the need to lash out at something for accrued sorrows had been so pervasive in Peter Square that he felt it was impossible to resist.

"I see that bobbing Adam's apple in your throat, bitch," Peter said to Jane Harley who, contrary to first appearances, was not the park-sponsored Snow White but was simply there as a tourist. She had chosen her wardrobe because she felt it was appropriate for her surroundings. A blue headband and white dress did not in and of itself make Jane Snow White. Few around here assumed her that it had. But at the moment it must be said Peter Square was not processing things accurately. He saw the stub of the Adam's apple that the Wyoming vet had only partially removed, judging its complete excision to be beyond his admittedly limited surgical technique. He had a touch of arthritis in both hands also. A simple man albeit one with a deep sense of mission, the vet wasn't queued into femininity's more elusive aspects. He cut in all

the right places and he usually left his patients at the Laramie airport with the sense that the job was well done. Just like putting in fence posts along a two mile border. It was hard, honest work he had performed, but entirely devoid of subtlety. He wore cowboy boots when he operated and cowboy boots when he consulted. Beyond certain biological touchstones he had no sense of what it meant to be either man or woman. He knew a steer from heifer completely as did everybody else in his part of the world. He didn't understand, however, when psychiatrists spoke about gender alignment. When your balls went into the metal pail on the barn floor you were aligned. And there was nothing else to it.

Keenly aware of all these imperfections in her re-assignment, usually Jane would wear neck-concealing scarves outside her apartment of a type far more decorative than the Roy Rogers neckerchiefs Peter had seen on Jack Hameister and friends earlier that day. But she was compelled to tailor her wardrobe to her surroundings. She felt she could take the risk simply because she was in such friendly surroundings. She didn't believe herself at risk because in the World's Most Happy Place™ gender was not an issue. It was a de-eroticized, infantilizing area where one supposed the worst that could be tossed at even a sexual outcast like Jane would be an inquisitive look from a rude child. It wasn't a true spirit of tolerance that made this possible so much as the Disney vision that turned all of God's creatures—men, women, trannies and beasts of the sylvan glen—into featureless versions of their former selves. It simply papered over differences of sex and sexual orientation. It simply made everything and everybody too banal to become trapped in the old hatreds that sought to enforce a status quo for the benefit of the strong and to the detriment of the weak.

Walking with one of her new friends that she had met in her Westwood support group, Jane wasn't anticipating Peter Square's direct attack as she might have been when walking through the streets of east Santa Monica where the studio apartment she had been living in for the past nine months was located, next door to a Denny's.

Now, when somebody started to accuse a woman of being a man loudly in this manner, the smart play for the

woman would be to simply profess to not know what this person was talking about and wait the motherfucker out.

“Lemme see your snatch, hun,” Peter Square said to Jane Harley. “It’s not a trench I’m guessing,” he said. “It’s more like a scar. Or maybe it’s not there at all. Snow White, I knew this was your malfunction all along. You’ve been taking it up the ass for so long from your dwarves you don’t know if you’re coming or going! And nobody would ever make you their princess even on a motherfucking dare. Even if you’ve offered them a substantial cash reward to do so it wouldn’t happen. So there’s no use in pretending you’re something somebody would ever want to take to bed when you’re not.”

Well, this was more than enough from Peter Square’s perspective because all that he had been trying to do all along was rouse himself from his mental rut. The vision of this tranny—if that’s what he or she was—had offended him because it seemed to construe a visual equivalent of his own unfocused, probabilistic mind set at the moment. Nothing was as it should be presently. Nothing seemed to be definitely one way or the other.

So fuck whoever it was, if he or she in fact actually there at the moment, if any of us were actually here at the moment, not some sort of shadow of a fiction rather built on a simple misunderstanding. He didn’t think this freak had any feelings. Just as he suspected himself of not having a soul. At the very least he felt the need to spread his own burgeoning pain around. He wanted to declare himself a damned soul. But the exact argot of despair had always eluded him, simply because he never felt strong enough to admit to such weakness even to himself when by himself in a sheltered room with all the anodynes that a successful life of crime could afford.

He didn’t understand that this emptiness poured forth from the upended root of a formerly hidden truth. This would, if it were pulled up to a sufficient depth, be the occasion of a psychological breakthrough for him, a letting go that might ultimately lead to satori. He was a doer, not a thinker. And like so many Americans he thought the mind was an appliance merely like a lawnmower created to effect one’s physical environment.

So it was that the possibility for transcendence was lost on him completely. All he saw at the moment was the possibility for self-destruction.

So fuck everybody. He needed to escape. His great moment of realization was still a good twenty-four hours off. He felt he was in pain. He felt he needed to set the record straight with the universe prior to moving on with another project entirely.

He would have been vaguely regretful for his conduct toward Jane Harley if he had ever been in the mood to recall it. However, standing there in the Magic Kingdom he was regretful of precisely nothing. The real (fake) Snow White eventually emerged from wherever she had been hiding herself and stared daggers at Peter Square. The security detail at Disneyland who were disguised as Keystone Kops (didn't you know that?) began to circle about him.

"Thanks for waiting up for me, bitch," Vanessa Doubet said to Peter Square from behind then punched him in the ribs slightly too hard to be considered affectionate. It was then that she mentioned running into a certain big-eyed shine in the hotel hallway on the way out. He had the room next door to theirs apparently. He was listening in apparently to all of Peter's decadent machinations through the adjoining door.

He alone knew the secret of fixing the TV, of migrating away from *California Living Today*.

"I asked him to give me a demonstration of his prowess," Vanessa Doubet said to Peter and picked up the windblown laundry tag of a day laborer's shirt that happened by. "I said do this for my boyfriend and he will be eternally grateful to you."

Briefly Peter Square closed his eyes and wondered vaguely how many black Disney characters there were at this park. None, exactly. Uncle Remus was missing in action as were the villainous coon zip crows who had once tormented a blue-eyed Dumbo. Something was afoot here, some deeper connection was being attempted and was failing miserably to connect the dots.

Jane Harley was in tears.

"*Was mich nicht umbringt, macht mich starker*," the fake (real) Snow White told Peter Square revealing an

uncertain Austrian lilt to her speech and punched Peter in the face. Soon the swirling Keystone Kops descended. At the sight of Peter's bloodied nose everybody gathered close. This was part of the Disney show. Maybe, but maybe not. Nobody was sure of their perceptions anymore. That was the Disney effect. Nowadays nobody knew their ass from a hole in the ground.

Sad but true—and this was something we're all going to have to understand if we're ever going to declare ourselves as different and finer from the creatures of the bestiary, as elevated above the leaf-clinging worms of the Amazon who were devoid of enough silk to weave a proper cocoon, or from the silverback gorillas of the highlands whose aggressive displays has grown progressively more feeble with years and now entertained its confederates rather than terrified—we needed to become accustomed to the circumstances of our internment.

"So much of this world is a tangible failure, a project that broke, a ridiculous piling up of the broken and rotting on a rotting floor," said the Trisangunarian explorer and generally uncertain metaphysical presence, Simon Tor to both Peter Square and Vanessa Doubet from his unstable perch in the red Mustang's back seat. This muscle car, pride of the Detroit fleet, wasn't designed to haul around a family of four. The back seat was little more than a narrow upholstered bench with so little legroom that even a non-existent being felt cramped. His pasty knees were constantly banging into Vanessa and Peter's bucket seats up front, and his bony ass slid sympathetically with each start and stop on the jammed interstate south of Anaheim, threatening to send him spilling onto the untidy floor.

Yes, gravity was the master of even a Trisangunarian high lord, and this truth was the cause of constant wonderment for Simon Tor, who, it should be mentioned, was capable of traversing the two hundred million light years from his home planet to earth but couldn't seem to stay aloft for longer than the half second even the mightiest of his jumps lasted. Muscles undeveloped and entirely hairless, he should have been glad he was invisible to so many. Ordinary folk would have taken one look at him and declared him the Lord of all Nerds. The plaid shorts, black socks, and billowing t-shirts that he wore

varied only by their mismatched patterns. He had grimy Buddy Holly glasses. He was about five foot six a hundred and nine pounds most of the time when he was not five foot eight and one thirty. Came and went from this dimension of space time at random, which was itself a cause of much annoyance with him. He didn't have his high lord shit together apparently. Yet he was a super intelligent being.

Go figure the mysteries of the world. Despite his four digit IQ, Simon Tor lacked any real understanding for them, and sometimes ordinary people perplexed him as much as the contents of any supermassive black hole. He seemed to be stuck in this planet up until the moment of his release. A ghost in human terms, a former flesh-and-blood creature, whose spirit was presently consigned to another dimensional plane was the best way to describe him. Though this didn't fit exactly either. He never was "real" in human terms. Rather, he always was what he was.

He always would be. Surprisingly this truth didn't depress him as much as it rightly should have. He was capable of very little in the way of self-pity. He would constantly look at the span of human misery and wonder why so much of it was self-inflicted.

"The path you're following right now has a definite end," Simon Tor said to Peter and Vanessa from the Mustang's back seat and peered out the dirty windshield with them. An epic traffic snarl that stretched near to the Mexican border had been created due to the mass planned on-rushing of illegals across the span of guard stations at the San Diego Port of Entry. They all just started running through its lanes like others did through the narrow streets of Pamplona. Once free of the Port of Entry, the illegals scattered in every direction including straight up the road that led to Interstate 5. The authorities reacted by cordoning off the entire area and closing down the freeway.

Presently the Authority was gathering agents at a central point for an on foot search. They were taking this breach very seriously as it stood as a direct challenge to their competencies. It might be hours before they decided to reopen. The poor bastards stranded in their cars all the way up to Orange County they didn't think about much at all.

The logical course of action would be for Peter, who was now driving, to turn off at the nearest exit and take the Old Coast Highway as far south as he could stand it then look for a place where he could swing back on later. Peter Square didn't believe in logic regarding matters relating to his own transport from point A to point B. He said as much to Vanessa when she suggested the detour.

"The reason we're staying put," he said to her, barely audible through the fat lip that Austrian Snow White had managed to plant on him yesterday, "is we've got a clear path otherwise. No stop signs or check points or anything of the sort. Once we move, we move. We don't have to get stuck behind a slow poke on a one lane stretch. We don't have to wait out cross traffic once we make it to San Clemente."

Peter had heard the radio reports about what had happened down south but he was still determined to stick it out on I-5. To him deciding to take a detour was a testing of his karma that, given his present spiritual state, he was sure to lose. Very likely he would wind up in the great ocean just off to his right or under arrest for drug possession in Camp Pendleton. He hadn't said as much to 'Nessa but this whole militarized area of the country they were approaching gave him the creeps big time. He didn't see why the government needed to hold dominion over so much land. And all the drug trafficking that went on in this area he was sure was the reason why they had continued to be around.

A man like him needed to take precautions even as he came unwound. This was why he was suddenly so regretful about what had taken place back in Anaheim. The last thing he had wanted was to make a spectacle of himself. He knew he was being watched constantly. The last thing he wanted was to give his enemies the cause they needed to execute a search of his person and use the meager amount of contraband they had discovered to execute a broader investigation of his and Vanessa's activities.

It had been a stupendous mistake to bring the Tek-9 along with him into Disneyland. When the Kops had tackled him, the gun imprinted a deep bruise on the outside of his right thigh. If they had found it would have gotten him arrested. Before they could search him, Peter Square

had threatened to sue DisneyCo over his handling. After all, a man had a right to his opinions. Even in the World's Most Happiest Place™ the gag could only be tightened so far.

He didn't think he had said anything untoward. The post-op tranny was a post-op tranny regardless. It might have been better left unsaid for the sake of his own well-being. But this didn't make it even slightly untrue.

"All this sitting is cutting off my blood supply," Peter said to Vanessa, just after he had put the Mustang in park. Not going anywhere fast apparently stuck in no-man's-land he was making an assessment of his physique. He didn't feel the need to keep his foot on the brake. His right thigh was aching underneath the numbness that prolonged sitting had caused. He needed to promote circulation in the bruised area immediately. The Tylenol he had taken wasn't helping by itself. He needed to exercise the affected area if only to forestall the coming of a deep cramp that would have likely forced him off the road for a while or maybe even for the day. He wanted to get off the highway. He wanted to avoid the inevitable conclusion that this entire trip was a mistake.

He certainly didn't want Vanessa driving. He didn't want to have to admit that he was injured apart from the fat lip. Things were that weird between them presently that he thought it would have been dangerous to tell her about his thigh. But he felt the need to do something about it regardless. He could feel the low intensity pain building, starting at his right calf. And there was no goddamn way he could take care of it while still stuck in the Mustang's driver's seat.

"Be right back," Peter Square said to Vanessa then unclasped his seat belt. Once outside the car, he began to shift his weight around trying to squeeze a bit of blood back into the injured leg.

In the meantime Simon Tor had scampered out behind him and was trying to regain his own bearings. He had his own reasons for being disoriented at the moment having nothing to do with bodily injury. He had a sense of foreboding disaster that seemed largely unjustified given the banal circumstances in which he found himself just then.

Scanning the length of frozen traffic both ways, Peter noticed that he was not the only one who was having a stroll around his vehicle while he still could.

“They say the motherfucker’s backed up for another forty miles on KABC,” a bald man with a body like Buddha told Peter Square from three cars up. By now a hundred percent of the population of I-5 must have been aware of this given that every station in the area had taken to broadcasting updates non-stop. A traffic jam large enough that even Southern California media outlets were taking notice had taken hold. This couldn’t have been a regular occurrence down here. The civil order wouldn’t have survived the ordeal. The man, whose Christian name was Chesley, speculated that this was a once in a lifetime event. He had never made it down here more than once every five years when taking a vacation in Mexico. This couldn’t have been the norm for an area wherein this highway was more or less the only modern manner of conveyance available. The old road to the right was for sightseeing only. And to the left, the luxury abodes that cut into the hills argued against any sort of mass transit improvement ever.

More than anything out here was the sense of wonderment concerning the freeway’s closure that needed to be commented upon. Things like this weren’t supposed to happen in modern society. The modern world advertised itself as disaster proof and when things like this happened even on a short term scale one couldn’t help but ask what other load of bullshit society’s planners had been spreading to promote the myth of invulnerability of modernity’s infrastructure. One good trembling of earth likely would be all that was required to put an end to this lie for centuries.

But this was a failure on a controlled, short-term scale that presaged greater failures to come. So folks were eager to talk amongst themselves about what was taking place. Because it was unique but not life threatening. They knew it would all be over in a few hours. It would only affect their timetable for today. Unless they were hospital-bound for some form of emergency surgery south of here it wouldn’t constitute any sort of lasting bad memory hardly.

Rather it had become the cause of excited chatter like during the first day of high school when everything seemed novel.

“I’m taking it all as a sign,” Chesley Murchison said to Peter, “that I was on the right path all along. Mysterious dark forces are blocking this path,” he said. “And that’s how I know I’m headed in the right direction.”

Ever since the day while departing Max Schein’s apartment he felt that he was in some way laboring under a curse. He felt he had been stricken by evil forces. Five months ago the diagnosis of cancer had been received. He felt it had everything to do with what he had found in the apartment. He felt it had everything to do about what had found him in the apartment.

He denied the accident explicitly. He felt that the forty year smoking habit he had cultivated since adolescence had nothing whatsoever to do with it. There were shadows on his lungs and in his cerebrum now and his liver. He felt inside these shadows housed microsomal demons would eventually be detected swimming around in a tainted cytoplasm, giving the finger to whoever was looking down at them.

“There’s a clinic down there outside of Cabo St. Lucas,” he said to Peter Square of his Mexican destination, “that dabbles half in western medicine and half in spiritualism.”

According to Lucky Murchison, he had had the requisite fourteen chemotherapy treatments and it had only reduced the existing tumors an average of thirty percent. So his options in America were for a greater level of chemotherapy or simply do nothing and wait for the end. He was trying something different not merely to try something different. He literally believed that he was spiritually afflicted. None of the cancer docs in that office building had been in that apartment with him. They hadn’t felt the evil. They hadn’t seen the look in Joseph Simione’s eyes. They hadn’t felt the air rustle mysteriously in places where it ought to have been still and the light grow progressively dimmer even as the sun grew brighter as the morning commenced.

So it was it was not until chemo treatment number four when puking his guts out that Lucky had formed the

opinion that it was Simione who had killed Max Schein then staged this discovery of Max's body by them both.

"He wanted to say 'I was there with you all along, so how could it be me,'" Lucky said of the Ethiopian who he had only met when riding up in the elevator with him. "He wanted to have a witness that he was new on the scene," Lucky said. "But in reality he had been there before then doubled back. He wanted to act surprised when he saw what was inside the john. But I figured it out. I figured it out that he was the murderer all along."

Simione probably was an ordinary hood who had gotten to know Max slightly then invited himself in and did the deed with the toaster oven. How this final act was performed it was hard to say but Joseph would have been obliged to knock Max Schein out first. Look, hard to say why he would have bothered with this when his obvious motive was a simple bit of cash. Lucky wasn't struggling with the notion that it all seemed too much trouble to go through. He didn't distinguish between one kind of crazy and the next. He was a street person basically despite his advanced years. He assumed Simione had some sort of plan and motives hidden from the world. The fact that they could not be guessed at now only signified to him how at-root evil they likely were.

He thought that maybe he had just been an accomplice of Schein's, that he had been summoned to Max's apartment in an attempt to help Max finish himself off. Maybe the toaster oven would have proven too heavy for Max when in his likely drunken state.

"He would lay in the tub with his eyes closed, I'm guessing, and the little nigger would do the toaster tossing," Lucky told Peter recounting the wholly imagined scene. Well, the nigger hadn't given Lucky his name. But Lucky would never forget him regardless. He never would forget Joseph Simione's face. He never would forget the way Joseph stared Lucky down as if he was doing all he could not to stab him where he stood.

He recalled the half-curse that Joseph uttered just before he left his person.

"All the evil resided with him," he said to Peter, believing that some form of magic had been used to enable Joseph to get away with it. There was no evidence for any

of this. And you'd have to wonder why if Lucky was so vexed by Joseph he hadn't called the police back then and reported him.

The fact that this Joseph was from East Africa made Peter Square briefly consider that they shared a common enemy.

"One of these skinny coons was giving me the eye the other day," he told Murchison, recalling his ketamine vision totally, "and it was all I could do to keep from strangling him where he stood. You don't act that way in front of Americans," Peter said. "Marines went to Somalia and gave their lives for those people. You don't act all uppity when you're no better than a skinny ape. If it were up to me," he said, "I'd ship 'em all back. In my line of work I have dealings with black people all the time, see?" Peter said. "But your typical East African Skeletor is something entirely different. You can't really consider them human beings. You can't really see them as somebody you should get to know in a friendly way."

As very slowly the cars in different lanes had resumed a crawl the conversation was immediately curtailed. Square was going to wish the man whose name he had not gotten good luck with his cancer treatment but such social niceties seemed out of place in a conversation that had taken place in the middle of a four lane highway. This man had a sort of resigned quality to him that suggested that such tidings would have fallen on deaf ears regardless. He literally believed himself to be cursed. Thus to do anything short of commiserating with him would have been insulting. Men who were being dragged to hell by the ankles don't need sympathy, they needed a divine blessing. The only decent response to a man who believed he was doomed was grim silence. You needed to provide assent that his suffering was real. That there was a real hell and he was nearly in it.

A strange character this Murchison, witnessed in a period of Peter's life filled with strange characters. He was indelible to Peter Square simply because he was so sad. He had his wife in the car with him and she had her head down the whole time he was talking. Certainly one of them or even both of them would not make it another six months. To a far greater degree than most people with his affliction, the truth had sunk in. He wasn't going to be OK. The

demons he was plagued with had already won before he was even aware of their presence. But he at least had the great gift of being able to surmise such truths. He wasn't lost in a hopeful dream like so many with his affliction. He knew exactly what was happening and what was about to happen and was taking steps to act accordingly.

He had forgotten to ask Murchison whether he had planned to do himself in at some point.

"If you are," he would have said to him, "I have techniques. I know ways that this could be done efficiently."

Peter thought he had considered the subject deeply. But in reality his advice always would begin and end with sucking the air from the barrel of the shotgun prior to pulling the trigger.

Everybody knew that! By sucking the air from the barrel you will not leave such a mess behind for somebody, some minimum wage making janitor to clean up. He had read it once in a book on aberrant behavior. In the book it was stated not as a helpful hint but as an objective fact. It was something that simply was the case. It could, therefore, be adopted or ignored as one saw fit.

He was at heart somebody squeamish around blood. No matter how much he talked about the proper way to die and how many guns he had taken to carrying around with him while on vacation, Peter was still squeamish about the red stuff's appearance. He wasn't a violent person, and tended to be the victim of beatings far more than their perpetrator. Another reason he should not be walking around with that Tek-9 was that eventually he would arrive at the point where it would have been wise for him to use it. Very likely he wouldn't have used it. When this happened it would mark him as somebody beneath contempt in the eyes of many dispassionate observers. A pussy, so to speak. Square could cultivate the aura of violent power simply because he was so reluctant to be violent. It was a poor strategy that would end badly for him. Filled with certain illusions about his own malfeasance he as yet couldn't seal the deal. He saw himself capable of so many dark things. Even as quite recently he had gotten his ass kicked by Snow White.

This Snow White was Prussian-Austrian, the daughter of a martial artist and a Bader-Meinhof parolee who continued to keep the faith in secret. A hard edge to her despite her glamorous looks. She practiced Muay-Thai with the boys four nights a week in a Torrance gym. She claimed secret knowledge about death blows in her thick accent to whoever would care to indulge her on the subject. Few did.

Realize, this was Southern California and there's a lot of strange characters inhabiting its hills, valleys, escarpments, the odd gulley and mountain summit as well. Peter Square should have fit right in. But he always felt the outsider out here. Back in Indianapolis everybody simply took his weirdness for granted. He supposed his temperament was better suited to the Midwest. He was a freak but not in the extroverted California way. He had wounds to lick. He wasn't especially proud of his social dysfunction.

Once back in the Mustang he couldn't help noticing an orange-clad stranger sitting in the driver's seat.

"He does puppet shows for cholos south of the border," Vanessa said to Peter and pointed to the inanimate figure in the back seat next to Simon Tor. What he was supposed to think about all this he couldn't know. It was all too much, too forward, too weird. And he was being fucked with again inexplicably.

II.

Vanessa wanted to stop somewhere before San Diego to smoke some rocks with this puppeteer, John Adidam Sun. Nothing for short. With him you needed to pronounce the three words altogether. John. Adidam. Sun. He was like the sun, of the Adidam, and his given name at one point was John. Or maybe his name was Mike and the Avatar had termed him John. John like a john also, the type you piss in. Yes, that was a type of crazy wisdom to be cherished. But truly he couldn't remember any more if his name had been John at some point previous to his enlightenment or whether it had been given to him by Adi Da Samraj. The Avatar had that effect on people that a second after meeting him all memory was erased. It was literally like

being born again. So you see it didn't really matter whether it was John or Mike.

John Adidam Sun had a timetable all his own about when he needed to get down to Mexico. Sensing his impatience, Peter told 'Nessa that he thought getting high right now was a great idea. He wanted to fuck with this man who had forced himself upon them so abruptly. Couldn't he simply astrally project himself to where he was headed, independent of their efforts? More so, Peter didn't like John Adidam Sun's looks. Maybe a narc. But likely he was the typical California hippie-clown whose presence Peter found so overbearing. He wanted to bring pain into his life. He had his own crazy wisdom to share. He had a life full of unexpressed aggression that he felt the need to unload in an instant.

It was all out of control by this point so he might as well. Peter Square might as well have turned the steering wheel hard to the right at some point and made for the Pacific Ocean. He felt a foreboding about where all this was headed even as he depressed the accelerator. The jangling marionettes in the Stang's backseat gave him the creeps. He didn't like their faces. He felt they were mocking him in some ineffable way.

He suspected this freak's presence had all been a set up on the part of Vanessa intended to get Peter off his game.

John Adidam Sun had brilliant orange hair on one side of his head and dirty purple hair on the other side of his head with each colored patch flowing down past his white bony shoulders. A harlequin he called himself, as if the reference was supposed to mean something to ordinary folk. He had a beard tied off at the end with multiple rubber bands. He had a certain secret mantra he mumbled to himself spontaneously.

A devotee of the Brooklyn-born guru Adi Da, John Adidam Sun was in possession moment by moment of a crazy wisdom that only the truly enlightened possessed. He was down with every sort of perversion in keeping with his creed. He wanted to shock to spread love like it was syphilis in a bordello. The puppets he worked did disgusting things, for example. And this above all other attributes proved he was a God.

“The meaning of life,” John Adidam Sun said to both Vanessa and Peter from the Mustang’s back seat, “is that it ends.”

This was one of Adi Da’s favorite sayings, stolen from Franz Kafka. Kafka had meant it likely as a type of Jewish koan, but Adi Da and, therefore, John Adidam Sun, meant it in a deeply earnest way. Within five minutes of meeting you, John Adidam Sun would explain the meaning of life to you. It’s the least he could do for you. It was the only decent thing to do really. The unenlightened were such pathetic creatures. It was really no trouble at all for somebody like him.

If the meaning of life was that it ended, Simon Tor assumed that the negation of that meaning was all the events that prefaced the end, which was to say, life itself.

“Suicide, therefore, is an eminently logical act and should be openly encouraged starting at nursery school,” Simon Tor said from where he was now crouched on the car’s floor a foot away from the puppeteer’s filthy sandals. Nobody in the car either heard him or deigned to recognize his utterance with a reply. This was quite alright with Simon Tor. He had already decided he would exit the Mustang at the next stop. The present population of the car had disturbed him to no end. The scent of Jon Adidam Sun’s months-unwashed feet was the final straw. He assumed it was a type of test of tolerance for anybody within its aura of which he had failed.

The marionettes that John had been carrying around with him were now laid out against the car’s central hump like so much freshly caught game awaiting skinning.

“Kaala and Sarga,” John Adidam Sun said, recalling the names of his marionettes though nobody in the car had asked for them. “Murder and Creation, Death and Life,” he said, “and roughly in that order.”

A groovy guy whose Samadhi was always less than secret, John Adidam Sun was only too happy to plumb his own spiritual mysteries openly the way other men would remove lint from their navels. As if it was the most goddamn natural thing to do.

He didn’t want to explain so much as he didn’t want to not explain. Enlightenment had filled him with the desire for talk like methane filled the corpus of an overgrazed

cow. What he liked to do now with his remaining days in this body was travel around SoCal and talk. He felt himself profoundly entitled to do so. All his wisdom was crazy wisdom nowadays. He had experienced the ultimate profundity before he was nineteen. He had lived amongst the garbage and the goddess both.

In the show that he put on free of charge, Kaala charged Sarga with a sword.

“I change hands quickly,” he said to Peter and Vanessa to answer the question about how it is one puppeteer might control two puppets. Once the sword was in Sarga’s side, part two of the drama would begin. They would both be reborn and take the opposite personalities. Some type of Taoist notion of symmetry was at play here. Or maybe—and much more likely—the concept was that all concepts must be abandoned when one is in the grips of a religious cult. Death and life are exactly the same only when you have abandoned the agreed upon definition of both. Everything in the universe makes sense once your brains have gone to mush and nothing is perceived as it is. And all truth is provisional truth, handed down by your master for a pittance of five thousand dollars a session (or a blowjob on his divan, depending on what the agreed upon method of payment was).

He changed hands quickly did John Adidam Sun because, despite all appearances to the contrary, he was committed to Adi Da’s evangelical mission and wanted to put on a good show for the tyros.

“They get bored quickly with the show once they see the puppets as just puppets,” John Adidam Sun said to Peter in particular whose attention was otherwise directed being that he was driving. Always go to the one who seems least interested in having you, being one of Adi Da Samraj’s, the former Bubba Free John, frequent sayings. What he was saying was that the presentation was just as important as the message. He felt very obliged to put on a good show if only because generating interest was the way to generating recruitment.

“What the fuck did they think your puppets were before,” Peter Square asked him. “Real life shrunken humans? Did they think they were disfigured friends of yours helping out in exchange for beer money?”

Ignoring the provocation as was his want, John Adidam Sun asked Vanessa Doubet what was in the glad bag on her lap.

“Methamphetamine,” she said to him. She smiled at Peter Square. “You put it in a glass pipe and smoke it and gives you an extra-planetary high.”

At the sound of the word extra-planetary, Simon Tor began to involuntarily flex. This in turn began to move Kaala’s wooden arm back and forth stretched across the hump as if Death were hailing a cab.

Peter Square said to Vanessa Doubet, “We should go somewhere to smoke it. Pull off somewhere maybe at the next exit just to smoke it. Baby. Just you and me. A rural area. Then I could pull over and find a suitable area to dump your bullet-riddled body and continue my vacation by myself. Right in front of the narc back there,” he said pointing to John Adidam Sun. “After having indicated that we might have illegal narcotics in this vehicle.”

A harlequin, a laughing man, the cosmos’ holy fool, John Adidam Sun began to demonstrate a fierce wisdom at being called a narc.

“Bro, make as much noise as you want,” Peter said to him, “but the fact of the matter is you’re tagging along with us. And why is that? You’re the one’s that dominating the conversation. And why is that? You’re the one that goes around asking complete strangers what is contained in their Ziploc bags.”

So it was intimated to John Adidam Sun that Peter’s Tek-9 contained a clip of sixteen rounds only one or perhaps two of which would be discharged into Vanessa’s skull prior to him deciding what would be the fate of any DEA agents in the immediate vicinity.

“Something you need to know about me, bro, before you start to mouth off again,” Peter Square said to John Adidam Sun and turned around to face him. Going sixty-five on the freeway it was a move that was otherwise counter-indicated, but here we have the downside of sentimentality. “I haven’t been the same since yesterday. Something’s opened up, or broken up, and I can’t seem to regain my bearings. Just can’t seem to rationalize why it is that I shouldn’t drive off the road and put an end to us all. Except that if I kill myself first then I won’t be able to kill

you. Or maybe I kill you and won't know about it. And so where's the fun in that?"

The crazy wisdom which emanated from each of John Adidam Sun's approximately six hundred octillion atoms constantly argued against any sort of personal restraint in the face of a seemingly legitimate physical threat. But somehow he managed to shut his pie-hole all the way to exit 9. Confront and rejoice! Disarm and absolve! Love and destroy! Abandon and conquer! Cornhole and forgive! But, on the other hand, Peter had spoken in such an even way that he had made it clear he wasn't joking. Motherfucker's eyes were red like the world's last sunset. Even an enlightened being on Level 7 of the celestial scale like John Adidam Sun (Jesus Christ was just a Level 5, FYI) still felt the tug of the instinct for self-preservation like the ocean tide when standing on a beach. Maybe a true Level 8 like the Avatar himself would leap into the breach without a thought. For now, John Adidam Sun needed to be satisfied with his own spiritual limitations. Perhaps it would come to him at a crucial moment. Then perhaps he could look back at this moment of weakness and laugh about it.

For herself, Vanessa Doubet was simply angered at this latest threat coming from Peter's mouth and had made up her mind immediately to off him at the earliest opportunity. No fence sitting anymore. Peter was a dead man. She would pull the trigger herself if need be. It was too much with him now with every moment being a potential cause for deeper conflict leading to violence. At some level she took him at his word. So she didn't think she had a choice but to off him based on this latest threat to her person.

The freak in the backseat with the marionettes she had offered a ride down to Mexico simply because she thought it would be amusing to see Peter's reaction to him. She realized now their relationship was beyond game playing. She realized there was no more humor to be pulled from this man whatsoever.

Square had given over to his fears and presently was acting the buffoon at every moment possible. Her only question for him was to wonder if she had waited too long. She wondered if perhaps he would make good on his threat and pull out his piece then start shooting. There was something different to him just as he had claimed. He

seemed devoid of vacillation suddenly. T here was this sudden graveness to his bearing that suggested he had made up his mind up so many crucial things of late.

Exiting the freeway at Solana Beach, Peter Square drove inland for a while making constant left turns until the road he was on was suitably narrow enough to suit his paranoid mindset at the moment. In an instant he wanted to be able to block the way forward for another other vehicle and proceed on foot. He wanted to be entirely hidden from view from the majority of through traffic. To be able to get a good look at who was looking at him was the reason why. He thought DEA agents wanted well established paths of ingress and egress in order to set up their busts. Could've been wrong about that but that's what he thought anyway. He felt safer somehow on a squeezed in two lane blacktop. He felt sheltered to a greater degree than he would have out on wider road. He felt he knew the territory even though he was functionally lost.

There was nothing special about the quality of the ice Vanessa Doubet had kept for herself.

"Don't keep it in your lungs for more than a second," she said to Peter Square who she knew had never smoked ice and began to search in the Stang's small glove compartment for a glass pipe. As the smoke produced by the drug was as toxic as that produced by the stuffing of a burning couch, here was a bit of unwarranted advice. It wasn't a mellow burn. Only those with damaged nervous systems could hold the smoke in their lungs for more than a second. But the fact that she offered it to him to begin with might have indicated that Vanessa Doubet was doing too much of her own product of late.

The attractive thing about ice, if that's the right adjective for it, was the speed that it got you high. Maybe five seconds after they had each done a rock, the pipes were on the carpeted front floor of the car and everything had quieted down inside the Mustang's interior considerably.

"He has grasped it, but no one is interested," said the harlequin John Adidam Sun, quoting Bubba Free John unto his lifeless marionettes, Murder and Creation, and thought to have a look around the immediate vicinity. As it seemed

they would be stuck here for a while. Peter Square's eyes in particular had been replaced of late by two black x's formed by industrial tape. Save lonely Simon Tor, there was no motivation whatsoever to perambulate, to go out into the world and discover some attribute to it resembling truth. Hard drugs did that to a body, reducing even the most effusive of social butterflies into cocoon-dwelling bugs . Born with his own enlightenment ten months ago, John Adidam Sun realized such things instinctively, devoid of the corrupting experience that might have argued something else entirely to him. He was accepting of the present situation and determined to make the most of it . Time meant nothing to him, being immortal. He was merely slightly pissed at not being offered a rock himself. He thought that was the whole fucking point of pulling off the 5 in the first place, to turn the new guy on. But selfish people were selfish people the world over. It didn't bother him so much that his hosts had bad manners. He simply would have liked to have seen what the meth high was like.

"Kaala, Sarga, *kriiDaa*," John Adidam Sun said to his puppets a minute later from his full lotus assumed in a patch of roadside grass and watched impassively as they rose from the car's hump, stretched themselves like cats in the sun and began the (for them) arduous climb down from the open car window onto the wide world.

Yes, puppets who were, when in the faulty gaze of their delusional master, able to walk and talk on their own accord when commanded to do so. What they were saying was an abiding mystery as John Adidam Sun usually pretended not to hear them. But they were in possession of the wisdom of unfeeling things as the Avatar Adi Da might have put it and probably had put it at some point in his testimony and teaching, a seeming unending stream of verbal discharge emanating from a mouth that might as well have been a prolapsed rectum.

When a man ceased to believe in the supremacy of an objective reality, you see, Grimm's fairytale-type bullshit like this was allowed to happen with semi-regularity. So here you have the spectacle of Murder and Creation climbing down from the car's slightly curved exterior trailing their strings behind them like they were recently landed paratroopers not yet free of their chutes.

Not interested in the vagaries of a human drug high they instead made for the interior of the nearest tony residence in this tony residential area. They were interior-dwelling creatures and instinctively avoided the sun like vampires. Inside, the cast of the light was far more amenable to a marionette's spastic dance. The revealing sun generally made wood seem merely like wood.

*18241 Colina Norte*, read the half-obscured address on the foliage obscured walls of this overlarge hacienda, a don's residence set on a plateau six feet above the road accessible only by a series of long stairs that it had taken the two puppets the better part of ten minutes to surmount given that they were dragging their HMI's behind them like jellyfish tentacles the whole time. And given that they were likely not moving at all.

"In my experience the grossness of the human imagination knows no boundary," Simon Tor said to his new companions having traversed the hacienda's stairs by himself minutes before in an attempt to distance himself him from the puppet master's foot odor. John Adidam Sun hadn't showered in months. When he did shower, he placed his feet outside the tub and leaned into the stream from outside. He had no sense of shame, or at a minimum no sense of how his hygiene might affect others. He had a notion of himself that he was beyond ordinary rules. The fact that he smelled was of interest only for unenlightened others. He didn't particularly see the need to refine himself in a way that made him easier to like.

The hacienda itself was in the style of the type of Colombian planter's house that made one wonder if it were not some sort of post-modern homage to the days before emancipation. One expected a whipping post to be present around the place where a drained coy pond actually stood. It was deeply tacky in a very obvious way. Which made one consider that it was all a joke created by the architect at the expense of the client.

"Nobody needs to live like this," Simon Tor said to his thus far silent companions. "Nobody is thinking correctly when they declare this the type of abode they want to call home. Nobody has the world's best interests in mind when two people decide to populate a residence this large."

It wasn't a frugal choice was Simon's point. And it was illogical because it wasn't frugal. Its brashness and ornateness seemed to lack a justifying point. It was rich people showing off for their peer group merely. He didn't understand it. The rich wanted to show how wasteful they could be. But the fact that they valued money so much in the first place argued against such profligacy. So there we have the riddle of such a domicile that shouldn't have existed at all.

Homo sapiens were blind to their own motives so often Simon knew that they should all be considered insane in advance and have them disprove the conjecture by degrees.

"The smell that's here now," he said to Kaala in particular whose enormous nose seemed carved with a butter knife, "is one which I can recall from a West Hollywood apartment years previous to this."

Not necessarily unpleasant by itself, but one which should, nevertheless, hold all sort of negative connotations for a clear-minded observer. It was a smell like rotting flowers whose perfume was cold comfort when held in light of the decomposition that was the fate of all living entities, Trisangunarian, petunia, human, and magically animated marionette, eventually alike. More so, because in vulgar human fashion, the smell began to trigger in Simon Tor all sort of unpleasant memories, which were in fact detailed bits of foreboding concerning the horror to come. He looked back to the time he looked forward. He imagined himself in such a place exactly as this, encountering mass death for the first time up close, not in his usual position on the bridge of a mother ship orbiting around a nameless but doomed planet. Above all, the Trisangunarian race was a race of observers, dispassionate as a matter of biological orientation, and meant to record and—if only ever so slightly—empathize, not to vivify and agonize. Something about the hacienda's extravagant plateaus of polished marble reflecting the progress of trespassing aliens, had thrown him slightly, forced him to experience a scene of human misery in the same way other humans invariably would when they finally arrived, when the social safety net finally twitched a day later once the rotten stink infiltrated the garden party of the next door thirty feet beyond the

privacy fence. He wasn't of this world, not of this space-time dimension, and only real in the sense that from time to time others declared him to be real and breathed life into him, so to speak, like a blow-up doll when the treasures of Saturday night have been denied to a man, because he is too weird and ugly.

So here was Simon Tor, metaphysical blow-up doll, becoming distressingly attached to the reaming he was receiving and starting to fall in love.

"Somebody's summoned me here, obviously," Simon Tor told Kaala and Sarga who were expressionless as the houseflies that began to whizz past them, entering from the same open door that Simon Tor and the puppets had availed themselves of, seeking out the heavenly aroma forming upstairs. Eggs needed to be laid in open eyes, maggots hatched, the miracle of life (the "karmic comedy" as Bubba Free John used to like to say when he was still Bubba Free John not Adi Da. As Adi Da he felt the need to tone his act down slightly if only to prevent further harassment from prevailing authority. He was above all a wise manager. He was really only in it for the pussy and money).

The person who summoned Simon Tor here was named Robert Lacombe and he was a kind of alien species unto his own. Perhaps Robert was at this residence dying in a painfully slow way and simply imagining Simon's presence. Simon who was either wholly or partially imaginary was the tragically real Robert Lacombe's best friend and former roommate. This was what happened when we died gradually. The absolute zero temperature of the grave sent the brain into full panic as it entered its cold field. It used its experience of the world which was encoded in its memories as a blanket to provide warmth. It recalled knowing that soon the universe would be beyond its recall entirely. It's truly touching in a pathetic way. When it was on-going, it was hard to gainsay the validity of the process of remembering. Or imagining.

When you are near death a faceless angel appears to you demanding your complete obedience to the creator of this world. Best to offer up your obedience unconditionally. It's simply the rational play at the moment. Because very soon your options will be severely truncated regardless of

the afterlife's makeup. One way or the other. Heaven, hell, or nothingness. Presumably you're sent to all three against your will. That's the fact all creeds can agree on unanimously.

Look, Simon Tor suddenly knew this hacienda like Robert Lacombe had known this hacienda, which was as a last refuge on a decaying planet well past the time for recycling. It was home so to speak for him, but home of a deeply provisional variety only. It was like being trapped in an airport terminal for days on end awaiting rescue. Robert was still breathing at the moment, creating tiny ripples in the small square blanket Do and Ti had instructed him to place over his head just before blacking out. There was no shame in the state his body would be found in but he had been told to cover up nonetheless. To Do and Ti, it would simply be a matter of symmetry. They wanted every bunk to look the same at all times. The Away Team's exit strategy would be seen as precise, the product of deeply rational minds. They wanted an impression left that an orderly retreat from human affairs had been beaten. As gender was an asymmetrical attribute, absent a physical examination the women would be indiscernible from the men. As ethnicity was an invention of diabolical weeds, the physical marks would be washed off of them prior to this moment like so much Sonoran dust being wiped clean from the unused pool deck in Rancho Santa Fe after a front passed by.

"They were the marines of New Age believers, the always faithful, the ones who had delved as deeply into their belief system as possible. They wanted those who ultimately discovered their bodies to realize this," Simon said to Kaala, who had suddenly turned to face him. Burdened by her strings and frame Sanaa had lagged behind seeming ready to stop moving altogether. Only death was ever-faithful apparently. Indefatigable. Early on, Simon should have realized this and taken only one of them along. From a distance he saw them as inseparable parts of a whole. Presently he was doubting that this was so. They were distinct from each other. They weren't twins so much as kissing cousins. They were more than capable of living as separate entities forever.

Simon Tor thought the dead and dying bodies all around him were the ultimate achievement of Heaven's Gate because it proved their souls weren't there any longer. Just husks now, the squishy centers flown to somewhere. To superstitious humans every corpse was worthy of veneration because of what it suggested was missing. Such men would stare at a dead body intently and wait for it to move around. And the fact that it never moved around, that something divine or at least essential was missing from it by itself is grounds for believing in God.

Realize: you are divine simply because you are. It's the simplest thing. But until life is nearly gone you never realize.

The Heaven's Gate Away Team never realized because they believed themselves to be bound plants awaiting an award of immortality. San Diego County first responders would look at their mostly superficially similar corpses and find proof of divinity in the rotting horror. In the total emptiness a demonstration of presence would be implicit. And rising above the disgust would be a sense of awe that a group of human beings would actually do this to themselves. Martyr their bodies and martyr their identities prior to martyring their SSNs. They had turned themselves into something purely material and to them this appeared a sort of Adamic miracle run in reverse. The name of God spoken backward almost like the name of Satan spoken backwards on the famous Led Zeppelin track. But miracles run in reverse were still miracles. Best we can do nowadays. God was silent in the modern age. There would be no proper miracles to speak of in the span of any of our lives.

Upstairs the bunk beds had been set up four to a room but try as they might there wasn't a complete symmetry achieved amongst the bodies. A natural variation had taken hold of the proceedings as a matter of course. The trauma of death had made the corpses jump and shimmy like puppets on fraying strings. Even machines couldn't replicate perfectly forever. And when you're in the midst of asphyxiation and the reflexes in-built as a last attempt to remain alive started there was little one could do to remain non-descript even when under heavy sedation.

“This one began to choke before she passed out,” Simon Tor told Kaala, who had expertly climbed up on the lower bunk to get a better view. Demonstrating curiosity, the puppet seemed more alive than ever to Simon. Unlike its abandoned playmate, it had learned to maneuver expertly with its strings trailing behind it. It had tucked its wooden frame underneath one arm carrying it around like a musical instrument. It had begun to sway back and forth slightly on its insufficient legs as if preparing to speak out.

Save the bulging neck muscles frozen there by the onset of rigor mortis there was little to base the assumption on. Perhaps also a swollen tongue that bobbed out of the side of the victim’s mouth like a panting dog’s. And maybe the blanket that, based on the large majority of the Away Team’s configuration, she was supposed to have used as a type of burial shroud rather than a pillow. Maybe the choking was an involuntary reaction to the poison she had ingested. It could have taken place after consciousness was lost.

This would have been the optimistic interpretation of events. Simon Tor really couldn’t tell which came first based on the corpse’s simple disposition. He wasn’t that good with his forensic science. But he assumed she began to choke prior to passing out simply because this was the way it had usually occurred. Eminently logical deduction here. He was completely devoted to the principle of the simplest explanation being the most likely. He wasn’t especially creative in that way. He didn’t see the need to be clever about the way the world was perceived.

In the large bedroom upstairs the TV/VCR combo that was plugged into a far wall was set to constant repeat. On it ran Do and Ti’s final message, shot from an undisclosed location explaining the great transition’s surprisingly banal mechanics.

“Take the phenobarbital,” either Do or Ti was saying by himself, “and break it into the applesauce. Take the vodka,” the other one said, “and drink it down in gulps.”

Aside from the vodka-phenobarbital knockout potion, there were the “space helmets” that Away Team members were supposed to have secured just after their heads hit the pillow. These were the thick plastic bags manufactured for long term storage covering Away Team members’ faces

that were already mostly obscured by the obscuring blankets. Unsecured by any sort of tape they were deep enough to remain on through the series of paroxysms that would have begun invariably when the point of no return for the body approached. Asphyxiation was likely the cause of death in most of the cases under this roof, though the bitter almond scent of arsenic wafting on the breeze argued that contingency plans had been made. It was merely good planning. Maybe people were squeamish about alcohol, for example, and at the moment of truth wouldn't swallow. Maybe they assumed (incorrectly) that death by cyanide was less cumbersome than death by suffocating in a plastic bag. At least with cyanide the point of no return would be quickly encountered and then nature could be allowed to take its course. There was always a fear that just before blacking out the space helmet would be ripped from around the head involuntarily. With them the fear of remaining alive was even more overpowering than the fear of death. They had reached this point in their thinking relatively young. They all wanted out. If Marshall Applewhite had not existed they would have had to invent him from the remains of their broken dreams. There was nothing on this celestial plane that occupied their imaginations, let alone engendered the possibility that anything might get better anytime soon. This was destiny and not foolhardiness. Don't be patronizing. They all knew what they were doing. Which didn't mean that at some level they weren't afraid to die. It also didn't mean, however, that they had made a mistake.

Robert Lacombe certainly had not made a mistake at least up until the point that the mechanics of mass suicide had to be initiated. Always a klutz regardless of the simplicity of the task, he was bound to screw up at least partially if only because his utter inability to get his hands to do exactly as he wanted. There was a tear in his helmet, for example, placed there when attempting to pull the bag over him. He had caught it on the end of his bunk's wooden frame briefly. This tiny imperfection had caused a small allowance of air that was keeping him alive long enough to imagine his old roommate Simon Tor staring down at him. The phenobarbital and vodka chaser had put him into a coma from which he would never recover,

however. Knowing his own bad history with acts requiring any sort of physical dexterity, he made sure to take a double-dose. There was a tiny crystal of white cyanide that he had intended to bite down on if Plan A (if that's what you wanted to call it) had failed. The poison would infiltrate his body through his sweat glands and that's what would do him in, FYI. Only the suddenly overtaxed understandably San Diego County coroner would find this point mildly interesting. Official cause of death in his case would be cardiac arrest rather than asphyxiation. To the coroner it was impressive how he had left nothing to chance. Usually suicides were not known for what amounted to contingency planning. They were usually impulsive creatures. Made mistakes constantly. And generally made a mess of both themselves and their surroundings.

"This is the moment all your life has been building toward," Simon Tor said to Robert through the membrane of the plastic bag. Lacombe's placid face was unreadable as it was obscured by a film of condensation and vomit. Simon assumed he heard him speaking regardless. He assumed he wouldn't have been here if this was not the case. He had been summoned here for a particular reason. He needed to utter something resembling a last rites for the man. He was being shipped off to oblivion forthwith. He needed another consciousness to bear witness to his pain.

There was no creature on this planet except for his father who could in a definitive way even acknowledge without hesitation that Robert Lacombe was a sentient being. Others had always only known him as a freak, which was to say somebody utterly devoid of feelings and therefore also devoid of moral status. Even his presently deceased therapist, Karen Kaminkoff, who he had consulted years before on the advice of a website dedicated to methods of suicide had looked at him like some sort of comic book character sprung to life, a mixture of the ludicrous and the pathetic, and somebody for whom interest was held only insofar it was difficult to determine his true motives or if he was capable even of motives, being somebody so disconnected from ordinary human conduct that the issue of his compos mentis was always at play, no matter how articulate he strived to be. The hour of

his Great Escape, of his divine transmigration from put-upon human to sparkly immortal was finally here. But in front of his would-be priest, Simon Tor, all he could think of presently was the issue of the missing VHS cassettes of 1996. Even in his death sleep they had haunted him to no end. He didn't know what was wrong still. He couldn't believe the black mailman's rude response to his simple query. He couldn't believe how so much had changed in his life after that.

It was Lacombe's present conjecture even now that if the first shipment of tapes had been received by him on the appointed time he would not be lying here breathing in his own vomit passively.

"His initial presentation was unconvincing," Robert told Simon Tor concerning his first exposure to the teachings of the former Marshall Applewhite once he had received a second copy of his lectures. A lot of dead spaces in Marshall's rap that provided the distinct impression that he was making it all up as he went along.

It wasn't the tapes' contents that had occupied so much of Robert Lacombe's Asperger's distorted attention span for so long. Rather it was their initial absence from his domicile to begin with. He simply even now had failed to understand how this could have been. A primal or even primordial function of the universe had been disrupted and he was struggling to understand how this could be allowed. Packages did not mis-deliver themselves. Wormholes in the space-time continuum simply did not open up spontaneously and spirit away inanimate objects. There was no satisfactory explanation for it Robert's view. A certain unsettling magic had intervened for reasons that at the moment were unclear. He had been the butt of a cosmic joke which he didn't understand. He couldn't gather why things had gone awry in this way.

So in short order the tapes had begun to assume certain magical properties in his imagination as if their contents had contributed to their loss. He couldn't separate the mystery from the message. There was a power to them beyond Marshall's professed beliefs which to Robert Lacombe at first and even second listening struck him as far too obvious to be valid.

“I was constantly listening for something that I didn’t know about,” he said to Simon of the tapes. “For something that I couldn’t have figured out on my own.”

He had tried on several occasions to track them down and investigate the causes behind his own strange bearing by himself. But always he was drawn back to the strangeness of their initial disappearance, the mystery where banality ought to have been placed, and the notion, never provable, that some higher power had wanted to hide the tapes from him for all time.

For ten days on-going, Robert Lacombe sat cross-legged in front of his TV and stared at the screen filled with Marshall Applewhite’s largely unblinking gaze. For the most part he was describing the process of planetary recycling likely already well underway. Whatever intellectual qualms he might have had about such a thesis were put aside simply because the tapes, not so much the tapes’ host, were obviously of an extra-terrestrial origin. The fact that he was watching it now was in Robert Lacombe’s mind incontrovertible proof that this was so. To one so completely trapped in logical loops, this realization was the closest thing to a mystical experience possible. As a syllogistic truth that which had vanished then reappeared must be above mere intellectual consideration. One needed to be invested in the material like a Hindu renunciate was invested in the earth when he was buried up to his neck in dirt. He wasn’t a person who took such leaps of faith casually. But to his mind Marshall Applewhite had satisfied the guru’s first condition which was that he should be the actuator of a supernatural event. There were certainly other conditions that Robert would uncover awaiting satisfaction. But he would first need to become a cult member to confirm that they were met. It was a paradox that he was well aware of. Even now it bothered him greatly. Even now he was considering its contours trying to find a passage into its interior.

Unbeknownst to either him or Simon Tor, Marshall Applewhite presently had sloughed off this mortal coil hours ago in the downstairs bedroom having been assisted in the act by three trusted Away Team members including M. Hernandez who had literally held the bag over Marshall’s face until the breath left him. So the paradox, which was a

contradiction in human understanding, was resolved in the usual fashion. Humans died and their understanding of the universe died along with them. It was a very simple principle but one which necessarily proved elusive to Robert Lacombe. He couldn't see himself as any sort of finite being. His own deep motive for escape worked against the notion that there was no final reward. And also there was the fact that death itself was some sort of paradox to the deeply confused, some eternal mystery that needed to be sorted out instead of seeing it as the simplest thing in the world, right up there with one's ABCs.

Thirty-eight out of forty-one hacienda inhabitants had already met their maker with Robert Lacombe being number thirty-nine. M. Hernandez was supposed to be number forty but, after witnessing the spectacle of Marshall Applewhite's death, he had locked himself in the downstairs bathroom and began crying uncontrollably underneath the counter while the others called out his cult name Smoddyy in hopes to lure him back upstairs. Number forty-one BTW was a troubled nameless soul all but undocumented (except in this sentence and the next two. And by the Rancho Santa Fe police log whose electronic author would take his anonymous call a day later describing the horrors to be found at 18241 Colina Norte). He felt he had owed it to the memories of his former friends to not let them decompose beyond recognition. He felt it was the only decent thing to do.

"The rational thing for you to do," Simon told Robert Lacombe once again being forced to point out his former roommate's mistakes, "would have been to murder Marshall Applewhite with a sharpened interferometer. You would place it near the body to see if there was any post-mortem electromagnetic signal transmission. You could murder a non-cult member, too, and use him or her as a control. You could be a scientist of the afterlife and create surveys about what was taking place and at what time."

A simple enough proposition, Simon thought, but even now Robert Lacombe continued to view the occurrence as a paradox. He intuited somehow that this all had been a terrible mistake and communicated as much to Simon. He felt nothing in the way of transcendence, no gentle lifting off toward the comet's trajectory anytime soon. Quite the

contrary. He felt he was destined for the muck. He felt his consciousness quitting him even as he was consciously aware that this was so.

Maybe it would all reverse at a dramatic point minutes later, but the direction it was all headed seemed to argue against Marshall Applewhite as seer. Too late to tell anybody but Simon Tor the sorrowful news. There was no salvation that any of us would ever be able to recall.

The meaning of life was that it ended.

Trying to speak, but limited by his lack of a working mouth, Kaala the avatar of death began to indicate to Simon Tor the need for a compassionate end.

“If I try and touch him,” Simon told Kaala, “I assume my hands will pass right through him. There’s nothing I can do for him any longer,” he said. “Because when he blinks from existence, I suppose I will too.”

Infiltrating his surprisingly pliable wooden arms under the plastic bag, Kaala tried as best he could to remove the film of vomit accruing to Robert’s cheeks and dribbling from otherwise dry lips.

Preparing for the cut strings.

The puppet laid his head on Robert Lacombe’s barely moving chest. Another five hours at the most and life would be through with him. Along with all Away Team members he had a plastic bag nearby filled with a form of identification and nine dollars in singles and a bit of change. It had been meant as recompense for the trouble the removal of their bodies would cause the first responders. In keeping with their higher call to service they didn’t want to be of trouble to anybody. They didn’t want to seem that they had acted rashly and left a mess behind them.

They were always thoughtful creatures, highly evolved creatures, whose one solitary vice, if that’s what it could be called, was the desire to transcend their awful circumstances collectively and become the perfect souls that they always imagined they were deep down.

“We are acting for those too cowardly to act on their own,” Marshall Applewhite declared from the TV just as Simon Tor was walking by. “We do in all honesty hate this world. Goodbye forever,” he said. “We will not meet again."

On his home planet, Trisanguria, Simon recalled that there was a bottomless pit in lieu of a mental health system. Troublesome beings like Marshall Applewhite would be tossed into the pit as a corrective to their distressing certitudes.

"In the brief bit of life that's still mine I will search for such a place as a gift to my human hosts," Simon Tor told himself when stepping out on the porch absent of his former companion. Well chances were, if such a geological feature even existed on earth, delusional human beings would be reluctant to use it as a form of psychological therapy. Unlike Trisangunarian social architects, the governors of humanity didn't assume mental illness for the true evil that it was. They were always reform minded regarding the mad. They always thought every misperception could be corrected through the suasion of chemicals and talk. They didn't see the darkness that existed inside insanity, which powered it like rods of uranium in a nuclear reactor. They thought it was mere electro-chemical affectation, that there was no moral dimension to it at all. Which was why things like this happened on this planet with such seeming regularity.

The Heaven's Gate Society had made it onto the pages of the sort of history books that they believed would be of no interest to anyone within the space of a few months.

"You didn't want to be famous in the eyes of your fellow men, Marshall," Simon Tor told the non-existent presence that seemed to hang over his own non-existent presence in a sort of half-hearted attempt to be able to view the horror he had wrought. "Because with the end of the world would come the end of fame. But here you are: an icon. They will dress up on Halloween like you for decades to come. They will use your example in symposia designed to dissuade suicidal thoughts. But *they* were supposed to be dead and you would be the one conducting the symposia. *They* were to be the objects of pity and loathing to you and your followers. *They* were to be the ones to be silenced. *They* were the ones to live on as caricatures in the minds of others. Now you realize something has gone wrong."

Somebody needed to take this world by the scruff of the neck, Simon thought, and make it see itself for the way it was rather than the way it wanted it to be. Either that or

maybe this world would truly be recycled though in a different way than what Marshall Applewhite imagined. The earth would groan from the weight of accrued human bullshit deposited onto its surface and collapse into itself just like a supernova remnant. At that point a real sort of recycling only on the time scale of eons could begin. But nobody would be present to see it take place.

He thought before he left this world he would write a report stating exactly this, albeit in more scientific terms. He would press transmit on his communication device then lie back in the nearest available cool patch of grass and wait for his own erasure. Unlike the Away Team members, he held no hopes for transcendence after the erasure. He was unmade and provisional even when purporting to exist. He supposed the ultimate end would have to happen sometime. And he was glad it would all be over soon.

There a hundred feet past Peter Square's suddenly smoking Mustang was a small meadow that Simon Tor had noticed while standing at the top of the hacienda's steps.

"It's a fine a place as any to rest," he said to himself once he was finally in its midst and stared at the strange and deeply exotic plant toiling at his feet. A harlequin's cabbage it might be called. There was one side of it red and one side of it blue. It was flat but curled up at the edges somehow.

Understand, it wasn't the type of cabbage to put into a stew. And even, quite frankly, touching it with the outside of one's sandal was an experience disgusting enough to put one off one's lunch for good. It didn't seem to belong to the genial surroundings at all.

Back in the Mustang a certain cathinone derivative had made it into that meth of Vanessa's that, when smoked, had turned Peter Square into a raging beast incapable of personal moderation or ordinary thought.

"Before I knew it," Peter told Vanessa Doubet while doing his best to clean various human remains off him, "I had his knife out and was going to town. He probably started it. Or else I wouldn't have had his knife in the first place. Because how would I have known he had a knife in the first place? How would I have taken it from him unless he showed it was there to begin with? Pointing it at me like he was on the verge of doing serious damage to me?"

Impeccable logic. Except that the “knife” to which Peter was referring was in fact a type of hammered down boring bar with a sharp sagittal edge. John Adidam Sun had used it as a multi-tool for repairing his marionettes. Likely it had fallen out of his drawstring pants during the time that Peter Square had him in a half-nelson. Not an ideal implement to attempt an impromptu scalping but necessity as it was said was the mother of invention. In actuality Peter had only gotten halfway through before deciding to pull the rest of it off with his bare hands. This he claimed to remember above all the sense data that had been bombarding him during those desperate moments. It was just like removing the layer of an onion he explained to Vanessa Doubet. It was if the scalp had been attached by Velcro. A piece of cake. Which made him think it wasn’t such a crime to perpetrate to begin with.

Look, if he was built this way, like a Mr. Potatohead, if this harlequin was little more than a doll made of doll parts ripe for excision, it stood to reason that any sort of attack on his person was hardly the heinous felony a zealous assistant DA might make it out to be later.

“They could use my hands, babe, as evidence in my defense,” Peter told Vanessa and held them up to what available light there still was. “See? Not so much as a broken fingernail. Not a scratch on them Just like peeling a piece of fruit. Which leads you to the conclusion that at some level this was what was supposed to be done to him. This was the way God had made him for better or for worse . I just came along first.”

The body they would eventually dispose of after a fifty mile detour out into the Sonoran desert, but presently they were both refreshed by their drug experience and were wondering when it would be safe to imbibe again.

“We’ll wait until tonight,” he told her once the skinny harlequin’s body was safely ensconced in the Mustang’s tiny trunk. The plastic bag that housed Vanessa’s stash had needed to be used as an improvised head dressing for the corpse to keep from bloodying his car’s interior. He told her to put the shit in the empty Dunkin Donuts Styrofoam cup she had forgotten to throw away earlier that morning. Maybe cover it up with a napkin once they had cruised past Mexican customs. They didn’t believe

themselves destined for a bust on mere possession charges. Post-high, they had come to see themselves as angels of light. It was some good shit they had just smoked, a hacked-up cathinone product, which would be used extensively in the so-called bath salts designer drugs a decade later. Made you feel alive once it avoided killing you. Made you feel you had something to contribute to the present age even as it rotted your brains from the inside out.

Drugs became especially fun once you bought into the lies it told your body. Ice made you feel that you could fly, therefore, you could fly. *Quod erat demonstrandum*. As people turned to hard drugs largely for escape, the fantasy was easy to buy into. Just needed to fudge your perceptions and memories of what really was and you're there. The true addictive power of drugs was due to the emotional sense of well-being they provide to a body, less the physical dependency that is produced. You wanted to believe you could fly like Superman. Thus it's easy to get hooked after one deep breath in.

Peter Square wasn't a drug addict, not yet anyway, and the way he was going likely he wouldn't live long enough to see himself whither to nothing like the wastrels of Vineland Avenue.

"We'll act cool until the coast is clear," Peter told Vanessa twenty miles out into the desert and wondered at his own cunning and self-control. He couldn't believe how cool he was presently with a scalped harlequin in his trunk bloodying up his spare tire. Knowledge of this equipoise filled him with a supreme sense of well-being. He had learned something apparently, overcome something as he otherwise would have been scared shitless about the situation he found himself in. Any goddamn routine traffic stop conducted on the part of the California Highway Patrol would have meant a life sentence for Peter Square. He had harlequin blood all over him. He'd have to first shoot the officer then shoot himself if he felt he was in danger of getting caught at any point. He couldn't imagine getting away with two murders in so short a period. So he felt a death by his own hand was a complete necessity. Wouldn't get taken alive and so forth. Though at the moment of truth who knew how he would actually play it. Every plan a

man makes in life is subject to revision. Or maybe fate would intervene before he had the chance to do what he thought was right. He had never been in this situation before. He wouldn't know how to act when a moment of crisis came.

None of this bothered him at the moment which was deeply weird. He felt alienated from his personal circumstances entirely as if he was watching a movie. It was a mildly interesting movie granted but he lacked a rooting interesting in the outcome. Let him live or die, it wouldn't dent Peter's good mood at all. In a way it would be better for him to die straight off as otherwise it would simply be delaying the obvious. He didn't see the logic for such a character to remain alive for an extended period. He wasn't doing the world any good whether alive or dead. There wasn't any great life lessons on the horizon that would require learning by him to complete a narrative arc like in a Hollywood production.

If a man placed a semi-automatic against his head in exactly the right place, it would be entirely possible that he would never be aware that the trigger had ever been pulled. The transition from being to non-being would be so sudden as to be unnoticeable. In such an instance there would be neither physical pain nor a moment's regret that it had come to this. Just a quick flash unto nothingness. A man would never know that he was dead or at the very least that he was not alive. This was a kind redneck immortality bought for the pittance of knowing where to place the gun barrel. The only way to go, really. It made complete sense to Peter Square that this was the right move for him by and by.

Before he had killed Jon Adidam Sun—and even though presently he was not aware of this—he had queried him about just such matters.

"Just fly away, bub," Peter told the harlequin seeing the sudden fear in his eyes once the Tek 9 had made an appearance. He thought he had heard all this shit on the way over to Rancho Santa Fe from the back seat about how John Adidam Sun was a beam of light that could fly any direction he had wanted. He truly hadn't understood the fear in the man's eyes, therefore. Just fly away. He truly hadn't understood how he seemed at the point of begging

Peter Square to leave him be even though it was his professed belief that he was immortal.

All in all, John Adidam Sun died like a dog, on all fours, calling out to his imaginary God or guru or whatever you wanted to call him for salvation.

“You’re no better than I am,” Peter Square had told Jon Adidam Sun as the life ran out of him rather quickly. It was all a bit disappointing for him that this was the way it had gone down. He had assumed his boasts had at least some psychological validity to them. But he had died in a rather conventional manner, devoid of leaping blue auras or the intercession of any supernatural force at all. There was nobody on his side at all, not even his horrible marionettes. The universe was indifferent to his plight as likely it was to the plight of every other creature in its fold. He sunk below the surface of the cosmic ocean without so much as a fucking ripple.

Thirty miles west of Palm Springs, Peter located a bit of brown-green overgrowth just off the highway.

“No last words I gather,” he said to the bloodied body once he had pulled off the road. He tossed John Adidam Sun’s remains into a patch of sage and quickly headed back toward the main road. “No sunshine anymore pouring from the crevices of your hairy anus.”

He felt no paranoia about leaving him in an open area like this. Somehow he knew it would be all right. There was no sense as had always existed within him up until this point that he might be on the verge of getting caught out by mysterious observers likely in the employ of the DEA. The hallucinogenic meth had set him free in this regard. He was literally a new, better man. Something would happen to make him disappear forthwith. The harlequin cabbage was back in Rancho Santa Fe and something fortuitous would happen to that, too. Everything would work out for the best or perhaps it wouldn’t. He had no desire to sweat the details of his existence anymore. He had found his little bit of happiness. He had no desire to question the peace of mind that had descended upon him so suddenly as to be miraculous. What was his was his. There were no repo men specializing in satori. He had no desire to start peering behind the curtain of his own mind just for the dull satisfaction of finding out.

Maybe in another frame of mind he would look back on this state that had come upon him over the past few hours and declare it entirely pathological. As if the drugs had left a deep mark on his psyche that required eventual filling in.

"You and me together through life," Peter said to a suddenly stiff Vanessa Doubet once they had rejoined I-5 and encountered the evening rush hour on San Diego's northern fringe. "I'm assuming this was what you wanted from me all along," he said to her about his newfound easefulness. "It's what I want to be the rest of my life," he said. "I don't have any ambitions beyond this moment," he said. "I'm not looking to evolve to anything else after this moment is over and done with."

He likely meant what he said. But then again he wasn't in the mood to examine what he really meant from one moment to the next. The words rolled out of him independent of self-examination as if they were made by somebody else. There was no real force to them anymore. He liked to make pretty word clouds presently to please others merely. It was hard to say what he meant from one moment to the next because of this new trait. He had lost his ability temporarily to be able to make a definitive statement about anything.

This was fine with Vanessa as long as he kept his Tek holstered from now on. She had definitely not seen this violent turn of his coming. Up until the point it was taking place, she had definitely not believed he had had it in him.

Eight miles from the Port of Entry they had pulled into a BP station so Peter could change out of his bloody shirt. Such a display would have been too much for authorities to simply ignore even in Old Tijuana. Down there they wanted you to have a good time as they sensed somehow that evenings like this one would be few and far between in the future. Their vacation thus far hadn't been all that they had wanted it to be but it was improving by the hour. They still had six rocks to smoke and Vanessa knew where she could get some more in a pinch down here. Probably they would wind up getting a room and smoking through the night. They didn't have a real strong desire to get back to San Bernardino County. They were still on vacation after all. They didn't have a notion that there was anything back there that couldn't wait for another day or week.

The outlook started to seem more optimistic by degrees when you simply ignored the logistics surrounding your goals' realization. Vanessa Doubet had always known this deep down, Peter Square had only found this out within the past few hours. This was as happy as he had been or ever would be. He wasn't thinking about the next day. He wasn't thinking about the narcs behind the tinted glass at the border crossings with their telephoto lens taking direct aim at his slightly creased forehead.

"We're gonna need directions at some point," Peter Square said to the disinterested customs agent on the Mexican side who waved them through annoyingly when they lingered in his row. Peter Square was just fucking with the man, who was otherwise occupied by a Liga Mex match on the portable TV in his stall. He couldn't be bothered with such nonsense as an official inspection. You need directions, gringo, you go back to your country and ask someone. Once in Tijuana you start asking for directions and people will assume it's a code for something. Nobody visits this border town by and large to attend an event in which punctuality matters. Directions here took the form of you driving around for a while until you found what you're looking for. It's the familiar Tijuana map. Keep on going right then left until you find what you're looking for. Because so many people, see, come here without a true destination in mind to begin with. They wanted to make the Tijuana scene. And, therefore, the only street that they should keep in mind are the ones that lead them straight to the border crossing later on.

Their plan had been to park somewhere downtown and gravitate to Tijuana's Zona Notre where they had been told the real action had taken place.

"You're fucking crazy if you take that with you," Vanessa said but not in a chiding way to Peter Square after parking when she saw him re-strapping his Tek. Just making idle chatter with her man, just pointing out the obvious for him if only to move onto a more cheery subject at some future point. There was some evil shit that went down in this town, she knew. But this was as much a reason for carrying around a pistol as leaving it behind.

Look, if he wanted to shoot somebody else he would shoot somebody else and there was no way of avoiding it.

But Vanessa Doubet had the vague sense that her life was being put in danger by her boyfriend's new values. She didn't think he would be the one to do her in. But maybe there would be collateral damage at some point. On the other hand, he seemed completely mellow. In no way did he seem to be somebody who was spoiling for a fight.

Three blocks from their car distinctly asexual figures in orange based them on the opposite side of the street which briefly made them think they were seeing day-glo ghosts.

*Osho meditation maum con l'Plaza dos Meurtes*, read the flyer that came their way eventually on this side of the street borne on a hesitant breeze. Strange place for a gathering of this kind one would have thought . But then again Rajneesh's Meditation Center had a large presence in this city. It was their home away from home you might say after the nastiness that had occurred in Oregon in the 1980s. There were constant public events on-going in which the Osho brand would be promoted. They didn't seem to mind Tijuana's salacious reputation. In a sense they fit right in.

Whatever was happening along these lines Peter and Vanessa were sure to give it a wide berth as religion in general gave them both the creeps. The harlequin John Adidam Sun in particular had weirded Peter Square out past the point that it became necessary to kill him. It hadn't been any spontaneous act despite the impulsive manner of its execution. He had harbored a grudge against John ever since he had spied him in his Mustang's driver's seat. He didn't like his manners for one thing. His puppets were future kindling for a bonfire of his own creation whenever he had the time to do so.

Too much talk of ecstasy, of obedience to a God, a guru, or a master with some sort of mystical authority in religion to suit to suit Vanessa and Peter's nihilistic lifestyle.

"You brought the lighter I hope," Peter said to her and began looking for a secluded place to perform what he assumed was still an illegal act in this country. He was holding the pipe they had just used in his left hand for safekeeping. Also the rocks he had long ago removed from the coffee cup and slid into his shirt pocket.

No shortage of shadowy places out here in the Zona Notre, the bars with open patios which were largely

unoccupied at this relatively early point in the day were so poorly lit inside as to allow any sort of transaction to go through within its interior and preserve some semblance of privacy to those involved in it. There were motels atop some of these establishments that advertised room rentals by the hour. There were several buildings without seeming commercial purpose to them along this street that nevertheless had their doors wide open. Probably nobody would have minded if Peter and Vanessa had just popped into one of them for a period. Nobody in this part of the world seemed to take much of anything especially seriously. If somebody became upset with you there was always a five dollar bill that you could slide into their pocket to ease all worries. But it was doubtful if they had simply popped in there briefly there would be cause to bribe anybody. They were gringos, after all, Tijuana touristas down here for a good time. When the shipyards were full in San Diego far worse than smoking ice would take place in such corridors and hourly. So in a way they felt absolutely entitled to do so. Down here they felt liberated regarding personal conduct. Everybody did. They would have been outraged should anybody have pointed out anything that amounted to Mexican law. Everybody assumed that they were free to do as they wanted.

The building that they finally chose looked like a former needle exchange center that had seen better days. Presently it was acting as a type of unofficial command center for the red light district's seedier elements.

"Not buying, just looking," Peter Square said told the sole individual in there besides them. This man, a bucktoothed Indian from Xecicuitol, assumed Peter was a customer. There was a bucket at his side that contained magic potion. And there were various stolen goods laid out at his feet on purple velvet cloth in a portable display.

The Indian in his own way was in the midst of performing acts similar to those that Peter and Vanessa were on the verge of performing as soon as her lighter could be found. This place was an open place to all those with contempt in their hearts for the glories of right living. The cholo who walked in minutes later had the needle he had used while out on the street still dangling out of a vein in his right arm like an avant-garde piercing. Don't ask,

don’t tell around here. Don’t look either. It was like riding the subway in the middle of rush hour. You just didn’t make eye contact with anybody. It was ordinary courtesy.

Peter and Vanessa found an unused corner all for themselves then squatted on the filthy floor passing the lit glass pipe back and forth between them for a half hour. Two rocks each they had gone through by the time the room began to contract around them and they figured it was time to scram. The come and go nature of this establishment that had revealed itself in the time they were there was proving unsettling for them. They didn’t see how they could remain safe permanently in such circumstances.

On wobbly legs they followed the crowd down the street to a particular plaza where it seemed a puppet show was on-going.

“Where’s whathissface when you need him,” Peter said to Vanessa about the man he had murdered and scalped hours before. “He would have loved this shit you would have had to figure. Or maybe this was why he was coming down here all along. He didn’t say exactly, did he? He didn’t see where he was supposed to be.”

A bearded marionette, this supposed to represent Osho, the former Chandra Mohan Jain, was in the midst of talking to the sun and lecturing it on how to shine.

“*With expressiveness, with laughter in your heart, with the joy that only you can provide for being alive*,” Osho puppet counseled then turned to the tiny crowd to tell a story about a certain blind beggar. “There was a blind beggar,” Osho said, “who was once handed a sack of gold that had been placed in a hollowed out book by a prince. And so, upon seeing him once more in the street he was asked by the prince why he still appealed for alms. The beggar replied that he was blind and had no use for books. So at the first opportunity he exchanged the book for a crust of bead. And that was that.”

Upon hearing this fable, Peter Square resolved to murder whoever’s hands had manipulated the puppet. Also the puppet itself if by chance, Pinocchio-like, it had managed to come to life when his master was in the midst of bleeding out.

“Don’t cotton to that spiritual shit hardly,” Peter Square said about the parable, the fable or whatever it should be

called. “In fact, the only stories I can stand hearing about nowadays are those that have no point at all.”

The Osho-fest attendees clad in orange comprised the vast majority of the show’s audience. They had also pushed up front of for a better view. Just behind them stood a rank of dumbfounded touristas, growing ever more voluble by the minute. They didn’t understand what this presentation was supposed to represent to them. They didn’t understand what any of this had to do with good times and beer.

Several of these surged into the worshippers (or whatever they were) and attempted to tug at the puppet strings. They had a suspicion that the puppets were real people either magically shrunk to puppet size or by some toxic Mexican brine. The weirdoes in orange likely had exposed hapless Metzaquitol Indians to it for their own entertainment in border towns across the country. They seemed somehow amazed to find that when they touched the strings there was a corresponding movement of the puppet. That it was all real after all. Which was to say it was all a faked show. But maybe the puppets were once real people and had been turned to wood. Maybe if you twisted their wooden heads a little blood would come squirting out at the joints.

“We need to start a fire at some point,” Peter Square told Vanessa Doubet giving voice to the growing disgust he felt for those around him. He imagined a conflagration grand and purifying like at the end of Poe’s *Hop Frog*. He didn’t have any tar and feathers on hand sadly. But he had a will toward extreme violence that he found deeply invigorating and would need to exercise at some point.

He wondered vaguely what fabric the worshippers’ orange garb was made of and how it would react when exposed to a flame for a few seconds.

“We need to take them at their word,” Peter said to her pointing just ahead of him. “We need to see how deep their God-love runs when they are on fire.”

Safe bet would be that they would start rolling around and begging for it stop just like the uninitiated. None of them were Thích Quảng Đức certainly. There was no safe house of serenity for them in the flames. They were decadent Americans for the most part playing at dhamma

as if it was a game Mah Jong. They were all hat and no cattle in this regard. They all deserved to be lit on fire likely if only so that they could reveal themselves for the phonies they were.

But Peter Square hated the Modelo-swilling touristas as much as he hated the Osho worshippers. Something needed to give in these two extremes, he thought, some melding of physical gratification and religious purity was required of one if he or she was to stop being a diseased asshole for more than a few minutes at a time. We are neither entirely body nor spirit but a queasy combination of both. And so both needed to go at exactly the same time. Peter would need to herd people into a place like an abandoned warehouse to get the job done. But presently the logistics of the operation was beyond him. He was too wasted to remember where he had parked his car let alone be able to think a mass act of mass murder through.

He wouldn't when sober have the drive to go through with it anyway. As when thinking straight his hatred for those surrounding him was more like a low-level contempt than any sort of spur to violent action. Smartest thing to do when you found yourself in such a situation would be to split from the scene altogether rather than lash out at your tormentors in such a thorough-going way. He didn't understand, would never understand, why people would comport themselves in such an embarrassing fashion. They needed to be cool and quiet not so hyped up constantly. They needed to realize that there was no such thing as a present moment in which to live. Experience was only memory and anticipation, nothing else. The present was an infinitely thin wafer upon which one tried to float always unsuccessfully. There was no way around the solitude imposed by the mind.

So the best thing would be to deal with all these motherfuckers in a more cordial way than what he was presently considering. But fueled by alcohol and the notion that in Tijuana anything was allowed, violence was occurring spontaneously all the time.

"Who is that supposed to be anyway," Peter asked Vanessa when a fourth puppet appeared on the stage. Before he was able to lip sync a single word, his strings

were immediately grabbed by a shirtless man with pendulous breasts and thrown into the cheering crowd.

So much for the play's narrative arc. T he Osho puppet soon assumed center stage presumably to administer a fillip to the rowdy crowd. But soon his strings too were ceremoniously deactivated by a clenched fist. Empty bottles of the Mexican piss water they served around here started to fly in the stage's direction. And very soon the androgynous members of the meditation society found themselves targeted. Very soon the plywood stage was in tatters. And something like true danger had entered the proceedings.

An odd occurrence was taking place. Rather than run or beg for mercy from their tormentors certain center members had opened their bodies to the abuse as if this situation was what they desired all along.

"*Regarder à gauche*," Vanessa Doubet said to Peter, finding it impossible in her suddenly altered state to speak English. Certain members of the meditation center had fold up gas masks concealed under their robes and were presently in the midst of fastening them. There seemed to have been a signal given that triggered the action. A counterattack was about to begin. Mysteriously men had suddenly appeared on plaza rooftops equipped with gas masks of their own.

A sarin gas attack to commemorate the two year anniversary of the one in Tokyo seemed very much the order of the day. Following the track of Vanessa's finger from rooftop to rooftop, Peter Square wondered why it had taken this long. He didn't know how such an attack would be planned. He didn't know what sort of physical and economic cost to the perpetrators would be in order as a result.

If the louts who were in the midst of launching beer bottles at the stage were worried about this turn of events they were in no hurry to demonstrate their concern.

"They've given themselves over to the dark god of destruction," Peter told Vanessa who he suddenly felt a deep affection for. "Just as we should too. Remember: breathe deep and rapidly. The fear we all have is that they won't use enough gas. Or maybe the wind'll take it in a different direction and we'll only be sickened enough to live

like vegetables for years. I don't know how it affects . But the idea should be to get as much of it into your lungs as possible and how it there for as long as you can."

In fact, Peter had already started the exercise himself the overlarge circular breath perhaps not ironically associated with Osho's form of dynamic meditation. It would either give you an embolism or give you satori if performed in an immoderate way. He wanted to be the first to die in the plaza to see what was on the other side. He thought it was funny what was happening (if it was happening, if it was not one more put-on in fact and something that a man could look back on a month later and be ashamed that he got suckered into it from the start).

Deep breaths from Peter, in and out, even as masks were secured and another sort of show was undertaken by those so willing to perform it.

"Baby," Peter Square said to Vanessa several minutes into his personal death vigil. "I know that particular nigger! I saw him in my dreams."

He was pointing at an orange-clad Joseph Simione standing on the stage's plywood ruins. Holding up a dark creature above his head like Rafiki held the lion king. It was a coyote pup pulled from the San Gabriels. It was rabid as the motherfucking day was long.

--THE END--

About the Author

David Miller is editor of *The Sodomite Review* (www.sodomitereview.com). He is the author *Happy Hour*, and *The Gates of Everything*.

This is his fourth novel.